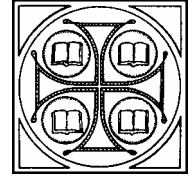


# THE WITNESS



## ✠ MARTURIA الشهادة ✠

✠ *The Newsletter of the Mission of the Holy Forty Martyrs of Sebaste, Sugar Land, TX* ✠ September 2006

### **Pastor's Corner – Father Matthew:**

Here we are again, at the end of summer and the beginning of a new school year and the beginning of our Liturgical New Year. This is a time the church sets aside: for us to reflect on the past year and a time to look toward the New Year. The church even marks this new beginning with special prayers that are said after the 1 Sept. liturgy. This New Year is why we have our annual parish meetings around this time. It starts the New Year for our Parish.

It was the 1st Ecumenical Council that decreed that the church year would begin on September 1. For the Jews, this was a time of gathering all the harvest and the thanking God for all He had given. September is also the month Constantine the Great defeated Maxentius with the sign of the cross. This great victory allowed Christianity to become a legalized faith within the Roman Empire. After this great event, the whole of the "Christian" world reckoned their civil new year to be on September 1st. It wasn't till later that the West changed its calendar using January 1st as the new year; trying to deflect or redirect pagan winter celebrations, at that time of the year. (In fact, in Scotland today "New Years Eve" is a bigger celebration than Christmas.) The Russia Emperor Peter the Great was the first Orthodox leader to follow the West's lead and change his countries calendar to January; soon other Orthodox nations followed.

No matter how we got our present calendar; it is important to reflect and ask ourselves individually what has God given me this past year and what have I to be thankful for? (food, housing, clothing, family, job, education, love, relationships) And collectively we as a parish,

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### **Parish Council Chair Corner - Edward Haddad**

As we near the end of 2006, I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Parish Council for their dedication and commitment to our Mission not to mention all of the organizations, committees, and volunteers who have worked many hours for the Glory of God. This will be the last time I write this article as Parish Council Chair and therefore would like to highlight our major accomplishments this year.

1. The first and long awaited completion of Phase I building has been realized. We are finally in our home.
2. Sunday School Program has restarted on September 10, 2006.
3. The Teen SOYO Program has restarted and the officers have been elected. We look forward to an active Teen program at the

need to ask what has God given us and what have we to be thankful for? (church facilities, faithful volunteers, stabile congregation, active caring members, opportunities to do ministry, forgiveness, acceptance) We need to always remember that with every gift God gives us their is scared responsibility and duty to make that gift grow. So, if God has given us something then we need to answer the question how do we best thank God for His gift?

The real answer is to share that gift with others! When we share what God has given us we are taking the scared responsibility and duty of growing that gift seriously. We are insuring that God's gift does not selfishly stop with us. We do this out of the knowledge that no gift from God truly ever belongs to us. We are only stewards of God's gifts not owners. When we share with others we become good "care givers" of God's gifts, not selfish hoarders. This also means that when we give God's gifts away there are NO strings attached to them. (i.e. I want God's gift to only be used here, for just that person or for only that which pleases me; and I want special recognition for my giving.) That is not how we "let go" of God's gifts and let them grow. What was given to us was freely given; so, we are to freely give away. If we have received something from God this past year let us then look for ways to share that gift with others in this new year; so that, we may truly be good stewards of God's gifts. Sharing God's gifts with others truly doing God's work and will; around home, in School, at work and in our Parish.

**Glory to God, in all things; Glory to Jesus Christ!**

**Bishop Basil's Schedule:**

14<sup>th</sup> November 2006

- 4:00pm Ribbon Cutting Ceremony
- 7:00pm Daily Vespers
- 7:45pm Parish Reception



- Mission and in the community.
4. Family nights have begun on Saturday evenings after Vespers. It is a pot luck event with fellowship and games for adults and children.
  5. Bible studies continue once a month. I would like to congratulate the teen and adult bible teams for their awesome performance at the annual parish life conference in El Paso. The team brought the Bible Bowl trophy to the Mission.
  6. The Ladies Altar Society, the Choir, and the Building Committee continue dedicating many hours and hard work to the benefit of the Mission.
  7. As I promised previously that I wished to improve communications to all of you. I hope that it met your expectations. Some people say that we are over-communicating. But I would rather over-communicate than not to do enough.

Please mark your calendars for the events that will take place in the next couple of months. On November 14, a Ribbon Cutting Ceremony will take place at 4:00 PM with the presence of our beloved Bishop Basil. City officials and other guests will be present for this event. The annual Parish meeting with election of new Parish Council members will probably take place on December 3, 2006.

As a final note, after Father John Mefrige left the Mission many people became concerned about the future of the Mission. God has His plan and we should not doubt it. With Faith as small as a mustard seed mountains can be moved. I hope that you believe as I do, that

Father Julian was God's sent. We are now able to hold a full Liturgical cycle. Many miracles have already happened in our Mission and "No" they are not just coincidences.

Before I end this article, I would like to take this opportunity to thank Father Julian on behalf of all of us for serving the Altar of the Forty Holy Martyrs.

May God Bless all of you.



### **The Ladies Altar Society of the Holy Forty Martyrs – Yolla Jabbour**

First let me add my personal congratulations to our parish for moving to our new building and I pray that God will help us to continue with our journey with love and faith.

The Ladies Altar Society of the Holy Forty Martyrs continues to be a very active group of women who contribute greatly to the parish, strive to provide opportunities for women who are encouraged to grow in their relationship with Jesus Christ, and experience meaningful relationships with other women. They work tirelessly to promote fellowship among the women of our parish, hosting many functions which have become traditions.

We have a place for all women whether you have just begun the journey or you want to move forward in your journey with Christ.

We hold our meetings on the 2nd Tuesday of the month @ 7: pm in the great hall of our new church.

These are some of our future activities

- We need your help with making the Altar

Bread. If you would like to offer some help, please contact Mrs. Laurice Krill at: 281-568-0422

- Ladies Night Out (once a month): On the last Friday of each month, the ladies will decide on a place to meet during the monthly meeting, but always check your e-mail to stay informed of the news.

October:

The Ladies Altar Society cordially invites you to an evening full of fun and entertainment the Fall Hafli, Saturday October 7, at 8:30 pm at the Yalel Mediterranean Restaurant located at 1801 Dairy Ashford, with live entertainment featuring singer Jabbour and his band. Dinner and mezza will be served, tickets prices are \$50 and \$75. Unfortunately, tickets are sold out but for more information contact Yolla Jabbour @ 281-313-3806.

### **Building Together For The Glory of God Edward Haddad**

This is the last building report (yahhhhh!). We finally completed the building construction and have obtained a "Temporary Building Occupancy". We moved from the Methodist Church to our new home at the end of July. The entire building is completed and functioning.

The building committee will continue to work on design and installation of permanent signs along Eldridge and Lakeview roads. In addition, believe it or not, we have already out-grown our 40 car parking spaces and we need to look at expanding the parking lot.

The interior of the building was completed for just under \$385,000 which represents a savings of \$260,000.00 from the lowest general contractor bid. The overall building construction cost including all site improvement is approximately \$1,620,000.00.

The Building Committee would like to thank you again for your support.

**Oratorical – Senior Division – Eddy Haddad**

As Orthodox Christians in America, we are increasingly encountering situations that require our responses. Every day brings us nearer and nearer until we must face the dread Judgment seat of Christ; so this is not a time for procrastination. Our faith is relentlessly being cornered by the over-tolerant, liberal culture that is sweeping over every region of this country. It is time that our generation of Orthodoxy must continue to counter and push back our persecution. We are called upon to embrace our beliefs and express them, just as openly as the rest of the World. I only address this topic firmly for the sake of its emphasis, as we must all remember to love those who oppose us. However, with that love does not come acceptance. Out of love we must put forth the responsibility on ourselves to share the Truth that we know and feel in our hearts. We must show those around us the way to know our Lord.



We are given a wonderful gift, a divine duty under God to bring as many souls to Him as possible and we must not falter from the doctrines that Jesus Christ has set for us. It's imperative to remind ourselves that our very denomination is the undeniable Truth. This world has separated itself enough times due to differences, but I believe it's time to make the effort to unite the world under one common ground: the Truth.

One thing that puts me in fear is knowing that my own church, the very church I know and believe to be the Truth, would slowly weaken its roots to accommodate the more popular denominations that surround and outnumber us.

What I want for my church to do more than anything is to guarantee that our present and future is equal to our past. It is our responsibility to preserve the doctrines that constitute our church and to maintain its untouched and uncompromised beliefs and traditions.



Love has to extend to everyone, whether it is through priests or the congregation, we are all equal in our responsibility. It is important to remind ourselves that our Church holds the Truth. These days, the word "truth" does not seem as poignant as it used to be and mankind has been left with nothing but comparing ideas. The systematic development of our society is based on matters of opinion and the supreme authority belonging to the most High God has escaped peoples' minds and morals. This cannot be overlooked, and we must prove to our Lord Jesus Christ that we are willing to labor for Him. God knows that we are all sinners, and He knows how much we struggle to shake off our sins with every passing day, but the more we are willing to suffer for Him, the closer we get to Him. Our willingness to suffer for Christ is our example to Him of our effort. If we can find it in ourselves to make such a sacrifice, then we know that in the long run, our worldly state will be heavily outweighed by the blessing of Heaven.



Being concerned with our own spiritual growth is only the beginning; it is part of our blessing that gives us the chance to help the spirituality of our neighbors through "a faith

unashamed, [and] a love unfeigned." I am especially guilty of dodging my chances to speak the Truth to those around me.



Amongst my peers, everyone seems to have their own story, their own mentality, and their own beliefs, and they know how to stand their own ground. I was intimidated by this, afraid that I would be cornered for trying to explain to them the Truth of Orthodoxy. But I then realized that being a faithful person is not about winning arguments or appearing spiritually superior, it is about planting the seed and allowing God to let it grow; as I learned when I attended an Orthodox Youth program last year that: "Life is not about a title, it's about a Person." Being a part of that program gave me the nudge I needed to finally gain the courage to spread the joy of the Truth. The best way I hear it put was by one of the staff members, who is now a priest in the Greek Orthodox Diocese, he said "Orthodoxy is the best kept secret in America, but what bothers me is that it's a secret." Hearing those words really revealed to me what the purpose of being Orthodox is. I wish to address to my generation to embrace the same ability and the desire to work for the Lord, to seek out those who will "gladly [receive] his word and [be] baptized (Acts 2:41).

Now, we know it's important to acknowledge that from Patriarch to layperson, we are all equal in our abilities to labor for Christ. But, one important thing to consider is the significance of the hierarchy of the Orthodox Church. We live in an age where so many people claim to be "soul-searching" and seeking their own version of the truth. What is most unfortunate is that many of them look for a truth that is adherent to their worldly priorities, something more "user-friendly", so to speak. These people are lost. They need our help and efforts to guide them into the undeniably true faith that has been left to us since the Ascension of Christ. The Orthodox Church must not falter from that

image, nor should it try to accommodate those who are looking for a more "modern" form of worship. Thankfully, we have kept our Church as deeply as its roots and owe it to the work of our Hierarchs who have been guided by the Holy Spirit. The Hierarchy of the Orthodox Church works as a conduit to reveal the works of God to the congregation.

In an Orthodox catechism titled *The Faith*, the author makes clear that "[b]efore his passion, Christ promised His Disciples that He would not leave them comfortless (John 14:18). He promised to send the Holy Spirit, Who would teach the Disciples all things and bring to remembrance all the things which Jesus had taught (John 14:26). It is the Holy Spirit Who unites us with the risen and ascended Christ. Christianity is, therefore, not simply a philosophy of life or a set of rules to follow; it is a living relationship with Christ Himself in the Holy Spirit. This relationship is the life of the Church" (*The Faith*, Pg. 153). It is as simple as that, yet why is it that so many people struggle with such a concept? The most saddening reality is that people are blinded by their own ignorance of what the Orthodox Church is through no fault of their own. They are made vulnerable because of the insidious works of the devil that are channeled through our everyday lives, which then plants the wrong message in their minds. Out of selflessness, and love for our neighbor can we give to them the same joy that we derive from the Truth, as "it is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35).



Aside from the Church, another significant factor in spiritual growth is the family. In the case of our children, especially, it is

imperative that they grow up in a strong and faithful household, one that parallels the Church itself. God should always be the most important priority in everyone's lives, not just on Sundays when you are physically inside of the Church. If we loosen our grip on our spiritual growth, we lose our faith. I know how this feels, and I know that it is a scary thought to have fears of losing your faith. But you must "let no one despise your youth, but be an example to the believers in word, in conduct, in love, in spirit, in faith, and in purity" (1 Tim. 4:12). Even in light of the fact that we hold the Truth in our hearts, we still manage to take it for granted, and sometimes even let it flee from our minds. Brothers and sisters in Christ, if we are having so much trouble keeping our own souls pure, then how can we expect to deliver the souls of others? The book of Acts states that "among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves" (Acts 20:30).

#### **THE HABIT OF PRAYER – Father Chrysostom**

Although we might follow the same religion, the quality of each one's spiritual life can vary enormously. In my experience this variety comes not from one person's upbringing or from another's knowledge of the faith; rather, the quality of spiritual life is rooted in whether one habitually prays or not.

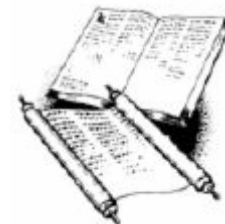


I do not mean whether they pray occasionally, as when they come up against a particular crisis or need in their life, or that they endeavour to come to church most Sundays. In themselves, naturally, there is nothing wrong with any of these actions. We should, of course, pray in any crisis and as for the obligation of being at church on Sunday: it goes without saying. The problem

In the monastic life there are the fixed hours of prayer but for the rest of us who must live in the world, there can be no reason why any Orthodox Christian, under normal circumstances, cannot find time and space to pray twice in the day.

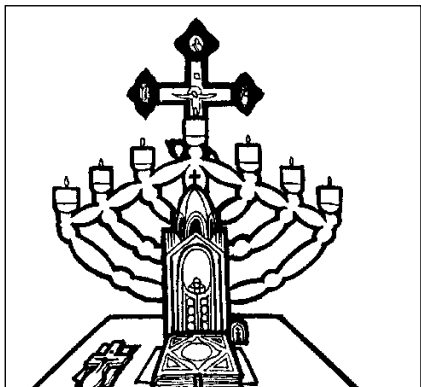


In our liturgical tradition the day begins at sunset; as one day ends and another begins with the going down of the sun, prayer should be offered to God. This idea, rooted in the stories of the biblical patriarchs (Gen.24:63), has always been part of the Christian spiritual and religious life. The simple domestic duty in the ancient world of lighting oil lamps at sunset became a feature of worship in the early church. One of the most ancient features of Orthodox worship is the vesperal hymn, *O gladsome Light*. St. Basil the Great refers to this hymn as being considered very old in his day (4th Cent.) Here, the evening light becomes symbolic of Christ, the true Life, come into the world. In the Orthodox spiritual understanding of life, all things can be seen as symbolic, pointing beyond themselves. Here, at eventide, we see in the end of one day with the long, dark night ahead, a representation of death which permeates the whole fallen creation. Into this darkness we invite Christ. This theme of light seems to have been practically universal in ancient forms of Christian evening worship. Psalm 140(141) 'Lord, I have cried...' was another common feature of evening worship, recalling as it does the evening sacrifice of the ancient Hebrews in the temple at Jerusalem. Needless to say, these two items, the hymn and the psalm, feature to this day in the service of Vespers in the Orthodox Church.



The other cardinal point for prayer is obviously the morning with the rising of the sun. Just as we invoke the light of Christ in the darkness of this

world, so the sunrise symbolises his resurrection. It is for this reason we should pray facing east, just as when we were baptised we turned westward to renounce the devil and turned eastward to Christ. The common features in ancient services – again, still found in the Orthodox service of Orthros (Matins) – were the Psalms 50(51) and 62(63) and the Psalms of Praise: 148-150.



Having made the point that we should pray at least twice in the day, evening and morning, the practicalities will of course, vary from individual to individual. Some may be able to pray at midday and before retiring to bed as well. There will, though, be other times we should consider. Prayer is, after all, essentially a continuous conversation between the soul and God. St. Paul famously calls upon us to pray without ceasing (1 Thess.5:16-18). It is important, for example, that we pray as much as we can with the Church. One of the best ways of preparing for a Sunday or great feast is to attend Vespers on the eve. Those intending to receive the Holy Gifts should not neglect to read the Prayers of Preparation and say the Thanksgiving Prayers afterwards. (The latter are always recited at the end of the Liturgy.) Not least, there will be times of need and other occasions when we might recite an Akathist or wish to pray for the souls of the departed.

What follows are some ideas which Orthodox Christians have long used and found helpful, spiritually, in their life of prayer.

Set up an 'Icon Corner' in your house. This can be as ornate or as simple as you wish. This might be a wooden board with hinged side-panels fixed to an eastward facing corner or wall. Often, an icon lamp is hung in front. As

well as hanging your icons here, there might be a shelf for other items. On or near the icon corner you might keep:

- The Bible and a lectionary giving details of the daily readings and the feasts/fasts that we observe.
- A bottle of holy water for blessing yourself and the household.
- A small bottle of holy oil for anointing when sick or for a blessing.
- Your book of prayers.
- Other holy items such as palm crosses or dried flowers from the Epitaphios.
- A small domestic hand-censer with charcoal and incense for use on holy days when you pray.



Of course, it is not necessary to have all this. It is, however, important that we have at home a space consecrated to God – just a simple area where we keep an Icon of Christ and the Theotokos together with our Bible and prayer book is sufficient. It is, though, correct to acknowledge the holy icons when we first come into the room with a bow and the sign of the cross. You might be surprised how different the spiritual atmosphere of a room can be where the icons are present. Not least, they will be noticed by visitors, opening, perhaps, opportunities for conversation and inquiries about our faith. Incidentally, why doesn't someone in the congregation with the necessary time and skills offer to make icon corners to order at a modest fee? Meanwhile, other items listed above may, of course be obtained with the help of your parish priest.



We have only just skimmed the surface here in dealing with the Orthodox prayer life. I have not mentioned, for example, the use of the Chotki or prayer rope and the recitation of the Jesus Prayer; this is a whole subject in its own right. The really essential point, though, is to pray and to pray regularly, that is, according to a definite rule. Even when you don't feel like it, even when the heart is cold or it is inconvenient, we should pray, for the discipline, even if it seem perfunctory, will carry us through the hard times. In the end, such habits are integrated as part of our daily life so that, bit by bit, grace will advance the quality of our spiritual lives.

### Upcoming Events:

October 3 <sup>rd</sup> to 6 <sup>th</sup> :	3 <sup>rd</sup> SCOBA Meeting
Saturday October 7 <sup>th</sup> :	Fall Hafli
October 7 <sup>th</sup> and 8 <sup>th</sup> :	40th Anniversary Celebration for His Eminence, Metropolitan PHILIP
Wednesday November 8 <sup>th</sup> :	Holy Archangels Feast Day
Tuesday November 14 <sup>th</sup> :	Bishop Basil Visit
Wednesday November 15 <sup>th</sup> :	Nativity Fast Starts



### Volunteers Needed!

Until our family grows, we are all under pressure to help in any way we can.

We desperately need help with the welcoming committee, the building maintenance team, and communications to name but a few.

If you can help in any way, please see one of the council members. Gus is urgently seeking helpers to welcome our guests and new potential members. We need to take their contact details, follow up with them, and encourage them to come to church if they are already Orthodox, or counsel them if they are not. When people stop coming, we need to call them to see if they are sick, or encourage them back, if they are not. If they are sick, we need to visit them and give whatever assistance they need... we are all brothers and sisters, and we are here to help each other in times of need.

Derek is heading up the maintenance team to look after our new home. Any handy man or woman should contact Derek to see if he needs help.

John needs help on occasion with writing copy for things like this newsletter, the weekly bulletin when he's traveling, writing press releases, the web site, etc. If you have writing skills, are technically orientated, or just want to help out, please give John a call.

If you have any suggestions, would like to see things done, or want to get involved in any other aspect of running our new home, please see any of the council members.