

• ST JOHN OF DAMASCUS ORTHODOX CHURCH •

12989 CR 1113, Tyler, TX 75709

Priest's Report • January 31, 2021

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

Glory to Jesus Christ!

In Luke 21:19, Christ tells us, "By your patience possess your souls." In this last extraordinary year, we have been given opportunities to do this hard work: to be patient and to possess our souls. To be patient with so many unknowns and changes. To be patient with our own lack of understanding. To be patient with our own weaknesses and the weaknesses of others. To come into the possession of our souls through this hard work of patience.

This whole year has given us opportunity after opportunity to "show our good works before men" and to reveal what our true hope and desire is. Just a few verses earlier in Luke 21, Christ says, "it will turn out for you as an occasion for testimony." (v.13) He says this about persecutions and trials, suffering of all sorts. All of it an opportunity for us to shine forth. I thank God for 2020 and all that has happened. We have seen things we have never seen before, mostly within ourselves. And we have been afforded a tremendous opportunity for self-reflection and repentance.

And in all of that the Church has not only endured but prospered. We have not merely survived the events of 2020, but we have "fought the good fight" and stayed faithful. We have seen our virtues increase and our faith strengthened. And for that we can be exceedingly grateful.

As we continue to pass through these unusual times, I have no fear at all that we will see anything but greater faith in Christ and the strengthening of His Church. It is a trial to be sure, but it purges us and illumines us, bringing with it a closer and more sublime union with Christ. And so, I remind you: Don't waste this time! Keep your prayer rule, your fasts, and be charitable. Read the Holy Scriptures and receive the sacraments often. They are life-giving and they do not disappoint.

Looking back at this year, I'd like to recognize a few people and their work within the Church:

- A special thanks to our Parish Council members, Xenia Durham, Lillia Longar, Zac Carnes, and Michael Williams. They provided support and guidance through unusual times and their work was invaluable.
- The choir members and readers of St. John of Damascus, especially Jeff and Connie Russell, had to meet new challenges and worked hard to adapt the services for new realities. Zac Carnes also stepped in to fill the role of reader for many services. Their hard work is obvious to us and we thank them for all they do.

- The altar servers also had to adapt to new requirements and worked hard to maintain beautiful and orderly worship. A special thanks to Paul Cowan who works faithfully to ensure this happens.
- Those who worked to maintain the grounds, particularly Johnnie and Anya Hoats and Bill and Linda Billington were vital in creating a little paradise for those who have come every week.

Perhaps the biggest development at St. John's was the installation of the new iconostasis and iconography. This is the culmination of the faithful contributing to the fund for many years. And more work is coming which will move us closer to completing the beautification of the Temple. May God bless this work!

With the pandemic last year, we saw an incredible surge in interest in the Orthodox Church. Over forty new individuals and families contacted me, expressed interest, or began attending services in 2020. We currently have twenty-four people participating in catechism, many of whom we hope to receive into the Church at Pascha. I delayed receiving folks into the Church in 2020 to be sure we were giving everyone adequate time to prepare. However, we did have two baptisms and one wedding in 2020 and expect many more in 2021.

We were also very fortunate to receive a somewhat unexpected visit from Archbishop Alexander in December. We are grateful for his calm and consistent leadership throughout this time and encouraged by his care and concern for us. May God grant him many years!

While we continue to pass through these times, certain challenges remain. Our mission stations in Longview (St. Ephraim Mission) and Nacogdoches (St. Paisios Mission) have gone dormant for the time being. My hope is that we will be able to begin gathering again in 2021 and concentrate some of our efforts for this good work. Our Church School program needs to be revisited and our focus on our youth can be strengthened substantially. The Church is on solid ground financially, but we need to begin to create a plan for future development, especially the construction of a church hall and additional parking, as well as the iconography program. We have many opportunities ahead of us.

I thank God for your faithfulness and for how fortunate I am to be a priest for such admirable people. God grant you many years!

Glory to Jesus Christ! Glory forever!

I remain your servant in Christ,

Fr. David