

**THE FORERUNNER**  
**The Nativity of St. John the Baptist Orthodox Church**  
 420 Laura Street, Philipsburg, PA 16866  
 (Rectory phone is out of service)  
 V. Rev. Fr. C. Michael Simerick, Acting Rector  
 Contact Fr. Michael directly at 814-375-1343  
<http://nativityofstjohn-oca.org>



**John Conkey-Council President; Tom Demchak-Vice-President; Judy Everly-Secretary; Mike Conkey-Treasurer**  
**Members: Mark Ammerman, Sonya Brennish, George Sura, Ivan Switala**

**MARCH 2019**

**Service & Activity Schedule**

Sat., March 2  
 Vespers @ 5:00 p.m.

Sun., March 3 – Meatfare Sunday (Last Judgment)  
 Hours @ 9:35 a.m.  
 Divine Liturgy @ 10:00 a.m.  
 Fellowship Hour – Simerick & Thompson

Sat., March 9  
 Vespers @ 5:00 p.m.

Sun., March 10 – Cheesefare (Forgiveness) Sunday  
 Hours @ 9:35 a.m.  
 Divine Liturgy @ 10:00 a.m. followed by  
 Forgiveness Sunday Vespers & Reconciliation  
 Fellowship Hour – Fetenko & Stine

Mon., March 11 – BEGINNING OF GREATLENT

Wed., March 13 – Presanctified Liturgy- 6:00 p.m.

Sat., March 16 – Akathist for Departed – 5:00 p.m.  
 followed by Vespers

Sun., March 17 – Sunday of Orthodoxy  
 Hours @ 9:35 a.m.  
 Divine Liturgy @ 10:00 a.m.  
 Fellowship Hour – Demchak & Foster  
 Parish Council Meeting

Wed., March 20 – Presanctified Liturgy- 6:00 p.m.

Sat., March 23 - Akathist for Departed – 5:00 p.m.  
 followed by Vespers

Sun., March 24 – St. Gregory Palamas  
 Hours @ 9:35 a.m.  
 Divine Liturgy @ 10:00 a.m. followed by  
 Vespers for Feast of Annunciation  
 Fellowship Hour – Ammerman & Conkey

Mon., March 25 – Feast of Annunciation  
 Divine Liturgy @ 10:00 a.m.

Wed., March 27 – Presanctified Liturgy- 6:00 p.m.

Sat., March 30 - Akathist for Departed – 5:00 p.m.  
 followed by Vespers

Sun., March 31 – Sunday of the Cross  
 Hours @ 9:35 a.m.  
 Divine Liturgy @ 10:00 a.m.  
 Fellowship Hour – Everly & Donovan

**Readers:**

Mark Ammerman, John Conkey,  
 Mike Conkey, Tom Demchak,  
 Doug Donovan, George Sura,  
 Andrew Tocimak

**Altar Servers:**

Acolyte John Blake  
 Ivan Switala

**Reader's Schedule**

	<i>Hours</i>	<i>Epistle</i>
3/3	Mark Ammerman	Mark Ammerman
3/10	Tom Demchak	Tom Demchak
3/17	John Conkey	John Conkey
3/24	Doug Donovan	Doug Donovan
3/31	Mark Ammerman	Mark Ammerman

**Notable Feasts in March**

3/25 Feast of the Annunciation

**Birthdays**

Richard Nakles	March 3
Lilian Ammerman	March 4
Irene Pollack	March 6
Joe Demchak	March 16
Holly Thompson	March 21
Elizabeth Blake	March 24
Tom Demchak	March 29

Please contact Shirley Donovan (814-360-3615) or Mary Ann Conkey (814-867-2926) if there are changes with the Fellowship Hour. Cash donations go towards the purchase of coffee, cream, and sugar.

This fourth Sunday of preparation for Great Lent summons us to contemplate the criteria that the Lord will use for judging us in the last times. It is clear that love is the criteria by which we will be judged. Fr. Schmemmann in his book entitled "*Celebration of Faith*" says:

"The 'Parable of the Last Judgment,' (Matthew 25:31-46) as this passage has been known since ancient times, is read a week before the start of Great Lent, during which the Church calls us to examine ourselves, our conscience, and our life against all the fullness of the Christian gospel, i.e., Christ's teaching, and to return as much as possible to what is most important, to the very heart of this teaching. Many people often find religion's most important aspect to be the rituals and customs, the beauty of services, the possibility of encountering the sacred, heavenly and divine. But Christ's parable of the last judgment reveals that all of this, if it is not based on love and directed toward love, makes religion fruitless, needless, empty and dead."

The Last Judgment as an event is related to us by Jesus Himself in the gospel for this day, and contrary to what many believe, including some Orthodox Christians, there will be a final judgment. The following excerpts are from the Fathers regarding the Last Judgment of the whole of mankind:

"The Fathers tell us the souls of the dead remember everything that happened here—thoughts, words, desires—and nothing can be forgotten ...If a man helped someone or was helped by someone else, this is remembered as is the persons concerned, or if he injured someone, or was injured by someone, all this is remembered. In fact the soul loses nothing that it did in this world but remembers everything at its exit from this body more clearly and distinctly once freed from the earthliness of the body... Whatever is in a man here is going to leave the earth with him, and is going to be with him there." St. Dorotheos of Gaza. *Discourses: On Fear of Punishment*.

"Life in this world is like writing on tablets: whenever a man wishes to do so, he can add to them or subtract from them, or make changes in the letters. But the future life is like writings on clean rolls sealed by the royal seal, where no adding or subtracting is allowed. Therefore, while we are still in the midst of change, let us pay attention to ourselves; and while we have power over the record of our life, which we write with our own hands, let us strive to add to it with right living and erase from it the defects of a former life. For while we are in this world, God does not affix His seal either to what is good or what is evil, up to the very moment of our exit from this life." St. Isaac of Syria. *Direction on Spiritual Training*, Text 80.

"While a man is negligent, he fears the hour of death. But when his knowledge is spiritual and he leads a righteous life, his mind is at all hours occupied with memory of future judgments ...and is in a state fitting for approach to God ... when he becomes a son, instead of being taught by the rod of fear and says: 'But I and my house will serve the Lord' (Josh.24:15). St. Isaac of Syria. *Ibid*. Text 73.

"Now bearing all this in mind ...let us therefore practice wisdom with simplicity, both as to doctrines and the right actions of our lives; let us judge ourselves here, that we be not condemned with the world hereafter ...And so let us not merely say to God 'do not remember our offences,' but let each also say to himself 'let us not remember the offenses of our fellow servants done against us' ... Why then do you thrust the sword against yourself, as do mad and frantic men, and banish yourself from the life which is to come, when you ought to use every means to attain unto it? For if this present life is so desirable, what can one say of that other from which pain and grief and mourning have fled away? ...Blessed, thrice blessed ...are they who enjoy that blessed rest." St. John Chrysostom. *Homily 39 on John V*.

"The Fathers of the Church draw a parallel between Christ and Noah and they say that the presence of Noah among his generation was at the same time condemnation and salvation. It was condemnation because the presence of *one* man who had remained faithful ...was evidence that that was possible, and that

those who were sinners, those who had rejected God ...could have done likewise ... Yet it was also the salvation of his time, because he was the only one thanks to whom God looked with mercy upon man ... The day will come when we shall stand before God and be judged, but as long as our pilgrimage continues, as long as we live in the process of becoming, as long as there is ahead of us this road that leads to the full measure of the stature of Christ which is our vocation, judgment must be pronounced by ourselves ...Judgment is something which is happening all the time within us; there is a dialogue, a dialectical tension ... which stands in judgment upon us and before which we stand in judgment.” St. Augustine of Hippo. *The City of God*.

Let us effectively use the Lenten period to glimpse the heights of heaven, our permanent home, providing we equally utilize the 40-day fast to plunge to the depths of our souls that we might seek through self-judgment true repentance and the healing of our souls. In addition, let us guide all that we do by the love of Christ for us and us for Him and one another.

### CHEESEFARE (FORGIVENESS) SUNDAY - MARCH 10

The final Sunday of preparation, the doorway to Lent, is termed Forgiveness Sunday. Finally, as related by Father Schmemmann in his book, “Great Lent,” the whole of salvation is centered in God’s forgiveness of our transgressions through the sacrificial death of His Son. We are to emulate His forgiveness by forgiving others that the living God, revealed as our heavenly father, might grant us His divine forgiveness and grant us eternal life.

“Finally comes the last day, usually called “Forgiveness Sunday,” but whose other liturgical name must also be remembered: the “Expulsion of Adam from the Paradise of Bliss.” This name summarizes indeed the entire preparation for Lent. By now we know that man was created for paradise, for knowledge of God and communion with Him. Man’s sin has deprived him of that blessed life and his existence on earth is exile. Christ, the Savior of the world, opens the door of paradise to everyone who follows Him, and the Church, by revealing to us the beauty of the Kingdom, makes our life a pilgrimage toward our heavenly fatherland.

Lent is the liberation of our enslavement to sin, from the prison of “this world.” And the Gospel lesson of this last Sunday (Matt. 6:14-21) sets the conditions for that liberation. The first one is fasting—the refusal to accept the desires and urges of our fallen nature as normal, the effort to free ourselves from the dictatorship of flesh and matter over the spirit. To be effective, however, our fast must not be hypocritical, a “showing off.” We must “appear not unto men to fast but to our Father who is in secret.” The second condition is forgiveness—“If you forgive men their trespasses, your Heavenly Father will also forgive you.” The triumph of sin, the main sign of its rule over the world, is division, opposition, separation, hatred. Therefore, the first break through this fortress of sin is forgiveness: the return to unity, solidarity, love. To forgive is to put between me and my “enemy” the radiant forgiveness of God Himself. To forgive is to reject the hopeless “dead-ends” of human relations and to refer them to Christ. Forgiveness is truly a “breakthrough” of the Kingdom into this sinful and fallen world.

### LENT – A PILGRIMAGE TOWARDS THE GLORIOUS DAY OF PASCHA

On Monday, March 11, our Church begins the solemn Lenten preparation for the Feast of the Resurrection of our Lord, God, and Savior Jesus Christ (Pascha). The Church calls us to make this journey to discover the essence of the Christian faith revealed in this great feast. However, it does so only after revealing to us the important themes of Lenten preparation through the five Sundays that precede Great Lent.

Great Lent is a journey, a pilgrimage towards the joyful and glorious day of Pascha. However, this journey has a seeming paradox for it calls us to travel in two directions at the same time. We are invited to carefully, through prayer, fasting and liturgical participation, grow in a greater communion with and

knowledge of God and at the same time to grow in a deeper understanding about ourselves. Thus the journey takes us to the heights of heaven and to the depths of our very souls.

The one ingredient that is absolutely essential if we are to attempt and to ultimately succeed in this journey is that of desire. We must desire to establish this greater communion with God through our knowledge of God more than anything else in the world. We must allow nothing to diminish this desire. To base our success or failure of Lent on desire is not a superficial notion, for we truly desire what we love. Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ said, "Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." Thus, we must desire God for He is our treasure.

The Orthodox Church carefully provides us with the means by which we can fulfill our desire for God during this Lenten period. Only we can be obstacles to that fulfillment. Without question, the Lenten journey is a difficult one. The increased sacrificing of time, talent, and treasure is difficult. Fasting is difficult. Sacrificing one's time for more participation in liturgical/sacramental worship services is difficult. Praying more and devoting more time for contemplation of God during this period is difficult. And perhaps the most difficult is not allowing others through ridicule because of envy or ignorance to dampen our desire to undertake this journey.

Let us make every effort to make this Lenten pilgrimage a successful one. Let us pray, fast, attend liturgical worship services of the church, and come to the sacraments of Confession and Communion frequently during this period. May we be found to confess our Orthodoxy not only verbally but also by living it through our total participation in the season of Great Lent.

## **FIRST SUNDAY OF GREAT LENT – ORTHODOXY SUNDAY - MARCH 17**

Lent has many beautiful concepts that encompass its meaning; i.e., it is seen to be a great pilgrimage taking us to the feast of Pascha, emblematic of our Lord's forty days fasting in the wilderness, the forty years of wandering in the desert by the Israelites of old, etc. Most importantly, Lent is a didactic experience par excellence. Everything during Lent is structured to teach us the mysteries of God's salvation plan.

The following excerpt from "*The Year of Grace of the Lord*" by an Eastern monk explains the theme of this first Lenten Sunday:

"The First Sunday of Lent - Sunday of Orthodoxy: The word 'Orthodoxy' was first used in connection with this Sunday in a fairly restricted sense. When it was first instituted, in 842, it marked the defeat of iconoclasm and proclaimed the legitimacy of the veneration of icons. Later, the scope of the word was extended. By 'Orthodoxy' was understood the whole body of dogma upheld by the Churches in communion with Constantinople. An official document, the *Synodikon*, which anathematized by name all the leaders of heresy, was read in the churches on this Sunday.

The texts, which are read or sung at vespers and matins for this Sunday, insist on the reality of the Incarnation. In fact, the coming of Christ in the flesh is the foundation of the veneration of icons. Christ Incarnate is the essential Icon, the prototype of all icons. Some phrases from the *Triodion* express very well the deep meaning of the veneration given to icons.

'In truth, the Church of Christ is adorned with the finest ornament by the holy icons of Christ our Saviour; of the Holy Mother of God and of all the glorified saints. . . . In keeping the icon of Christ, which we praise and venerate, we do not risk being led astray. May those who do not believe this be put to confusion. For it is our kneeling before the incarnate Son and not the adoration of His icon that is a glory for us.'

The glorified saints were living, even though imperfect, images of God. They were weaker reproductions of the true divine Image, which is Christ. During the liturgy this Sunday, in the reading from

the Epistle to the Hebrews (11:24-26, 32-40), we will hear their inspired author describe the sufferings of Moses and of David, of the patriarchs and martyrs of Israel, of those ‘of whom the world was not worthy’, who were scourged, slain with the sword, and beheaded, and whose faith yet overcame the world. These were images drawn not on wood, but in the flesh. They already prefigured and announced the coming of the definitive Icon, the Person of Christ.”

The Lenten period, as mentioned earlier, is a didactic period opening our minds and hearts to God’s eternal truth regarding our earthly life and the life He has called us to at the end of this age. To contemplate the holy images on the icon screen and walls of our churches is a constant reminder for us to diligently resurrect God’s image in each and every one of us. Let us effectively utilize the Lenten period, which the holy Church (our Mother) makes available precisely for the healing of our souls, to strengthen the image of God within us.

## **SECOND SUNDAY OF GREAT LENT – ST. GREGORY PALAMAS - MARCH 24**

All Lenten Sundays have two themes, one pertaining to the instructional themes preparing catechumens for baptism and the other an historical theme that has brought about the commemoration of pertinent events or individuals in the historical life of the Church. The catechetical theme of this second Sunday has to do with faith, and the gospel of the paralytic is offered as an example of how even the faith of others can effect God’s mercy on our behalf.

The historical theme for this Sunday has to do with the commemoration of St. Gregory of Palamas. Father Schmemmann in his book, *Great Lent*, writes “The condemnation of his enemies and the vindication of his teachings by the church in the fourteenth century were acclaimed as a second triumph of Orthodoxy, and for this reason its annual celebration was prescribed for the second Sunday of Lent.” The first Sunday of Lent commemorates the Orthodox victory over the iconoclasts. The second Sunday commemorates the triumph of St. Gregory’s teaching over the heretical teaching of Barlaam regarding the uncreated energies of God. The following is an excerpt taken from the *Prologue from Ochrid* by Bishop Nikolai Velimirovic:

### St. Gregory Palamas, Archbishop of Salonica

“Gregory’s father was an eminent official at the court of the Emperor Andronicus II Palaeologus. The gifted Gregory, completing his secular studies, did not want to go into imperial service at court, but withdrew to the Holy Mountain and became a monk, living in asceticism at Vatopedi and the Great Lavra. He waged war against the heretic Barlaam, and finally overcame him. He was consecrated Metropolitan of Salonica in 1347, being glorified both as an ascetic and a theologian, both as a hierarch and a wonderworker. The most holy Mother of God, St. John the Theologian, St. Dimitrios, St. Antony the Great, St. John Chrysostom and angels of God all appeared to him at different times. He governed the Church in Salonica for twelve years, of which he spent one year in slavery to the Saracens in Asia. He entered peacefully into rest in 1359, and entered into the Kingdom of Christ. His relics are preserved in Salonica, where there is a beautiful church dedicated to him.

St. Gregory Palamas learned much through heavenly revelations. When he had spent three years in silence in a cell near the Great Lavra, the time came for him to go among men and help them from his amassed knowledge and experience. God made this clear to him in a strange revelation: One day, being half-asleep, Gregory saw himself holding in his hands an overflowing bowl of milk which, little by little, became changed into wine that spilled over the lip of the bowl and soaked his hands and clothing. A youth then appeared, bathed in light, and said to him: ‘Why do you not share with others that wonderful drink that you are wasting so carelessly, or are you not aware that it is a gift of God’s grace?’ To this, Gregory replied: ‘But, if there is no-one in these days who knows the need of such a drink, to whom should I give it?’ Then the young man said to him: ‘Even if there are none thirsty for such a drink, you must pay your debt and not neglect such a gift.’ Gregory interpreted the milk as signifying the ordinary knowledge of the mass of the people with reference to moral life and conduct, and the wine as signifying the knowledge of dogma.

Gregory shut himself in a monastery a second time, and there studied and wrote. On the Eve of the Feast of St Antony the Great, the monks called him to the Vigil service but he stayed to work in his cell, while the brethren all went to church. St Antony suddenly appeared to him and said: 'Perfect silence is good, but to be with the brethren is sometimes necessary.' Convinced by this vision, Gregory at once went to the church, to the joy of all the monks."

## FEAST OF THE ANNUNCIATION - MARCH 25

The holy Feast of the Annunciation, celebrated on March 25, inaugurates the birth of the Messiah which we will commemorate on December 25. This miracle helps us to realize that the whole of creation is a miracle, and all created both visible and invisible is guided by God's loving hand. In addition, this commemoration makes evident to us that God seeks our participation in perfecting the miracle of His salvation plan so that we might inherit eternal life. This event which facilitates the birth of the Messiah reveals the wisdom of God which is in opposition to the wisdom of men. We see the extraordinary revealed as ordinary and that which is exalted made commonplace, thus revealing the true nature of God manifested in His humility.

The following insight regarding the consequences of this holy Feast of the Annunciation is stated by St. Maximus the Confessor:

"Let us contemplate with faith the mystery of the divine incarnation...For who, relying on the power of rational demonstration, can explain how the conception of the divine Logos took place? ...How was there an engendering without loss of maidenhood? How did a mother, after giving birth, remain a virgin? ...How was He who was pure baptized? How did He who was hungry give sustenance? How did He who was weary impart strength? How did He who suffered dispense healing? How did He who was dying bestow life? And, to put the most important last, how did God make real for us things beyond intellect and reason."

The following information regarding the Annunciation is given by St. Nicholas Velimirovic and taken from the Prologue from Ochrid:

"When the most holy Virgin had lived and served in the Temple at Jerusalem for eleven years, and was by then fourteen years old--when, that is, she was entering on her fifteenth year--the priests informed her that according to the Law, she could no longer remain in the Temple but must be betrothed and marry. But, to the great surprise of all the priests, the most holy Virgin replied that she had dedicated herself to God and wished to remain a maiden till death and enter into wedlock with no one.

Then, by God's providence and under His inspiration, Zacharias, the high priest and father of the Forerunner, in consultation with the other priests, chose twelve unmarried men from the tribe of David so that they might entrust the Virgin Mary to one of them to preserve her virginity and care for her. She was thus entrusted to Joseph, an old man from Nazareth and a kinsman of hers. In his house, the most holy virgin continued to live in the same manner as in the Temple of Solomon, passing her time in the reading of the sacred Scriptures, in prayer, in pondering on the works of God, in fasting and in handwork. She scarcely ever left the house, nor took an interest in worldly matters or events. She generally conversed very little with anyone, and never without a particular need. She was intimate only with the two daughters of Joseph.

But when the time prophesied by the Prophet Daniel had come and when God was pleased to fulfill the promise made to Adam when He drove him out of Paradise, and to the prophets, the mighty Archangel Gabriel appeared in the chamber of the most holy Virgin, at the precise moment (as some priestly writers have related) that she was holding open on her lap the book of the Prophet Isaiah and pondering on his great prophecy: 'Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son'. Gabriel appeared to her in angelic light and said to her: 'Rejoice, thou that art highly favored, the Lord is with thee!', and so forth, just as is related in the Gospel of the divine Luke. With this angelic greeting and the descent of the Holy Spirit, the salvation of mankind and the renewal of creation were set in motion. The Archangel turned the first page of the story of the New Testament with the word 'Rejoice!' to show by this the joy that the New Testament

signifies for mankind and for all things created. And therefore the Annunciation is looked upon as a joyous, as well as a great, feast.”

**THIRD SUNDAY OF GREAT LENT – VENERATION OF THE PRECIOUS CROSS - MARCH 31**

The cross is placed in the center of the church on the third Sunday of Lent that we might reflect on the symbol, that for the world connotes defeat, but for Christians is the sign of victory. The victory proclaimed in the cross is two-fold. We are reminded that by Christ’s death on the cross He defeated death and made possible for us resurrection to eternal life. Also, we are reminded by contemplating the cross how God through the cross has revealed to us the true sinful nature of this world.

We rejoice that our Lord trampled down death by death, but we must not forget that in order to do so He had to suffer and die at the hands of those He created. The ultimate question that we must ask ourselves is “Why did our Lord invoke so much hatred and savage behavior?” What did He preach or teach that offended not only the Romans but also the people of Israel, His chosen? The answer is: He preached love, peace, and harmony. He was made to suffer and die because the world also preaches love, peace, and harmony, and He revealed that what the world claims is a lie. Love, peace, and the coming together of the human race is not possible as long as sin prevails. Christ revealed that the greatest sin is that the world rejects the true belief in His father and Him.

As long as man rejects the truth about His origin and all that God has revealed in the Scriptures to save us, any discussion about love, peace, and harmony in this world is an illusion. What Christ taught and ultimately died for was the truth. When we reflect on the cross, therefore, we have to be willing also to suffer and perhaps die for that very truth.

What truth must we defend? It is clear that God made us and through sin we rejected Him. He sent His son to atone for our sins. By accepting Christ through baptism, we are made sons of God that we might live out our lives in this world in preparation for the world to come. We either defend or reject this simple truth each day by the decisions we make and the actions we take. By rejecting this truth and living in accordance with another reality, we, too, are crucifiers of Christ. This crucifixion is as real as the one He suffered at the hands of those who rejected the truth He witnessed to some 2,000 years ago.

May God grant that the symbol of the cross ever remain a sign of victory to us by our allying ourselves with Christ, witnessing to His truth, that we might ultimately participate in the new life He has promised and that the truth reveals.

