



## **Southeastern (Atlanta) Deanery Report 2017 Diocesan Assembly**

### **St. Luke Orthodox Mission, Anniston, AL Fr. Basil Henry**

#### **"The Year that was Almost My Last"**

It has been a rather eventful year here at St. Luke in Anniston, Alabama. Please forgive this longer Deanery Parish Report but I wanted to include an update on our clergy's medical conditions.

#### **Medical Updates**

This time last year I nearly died - at the age of 53! During the DOS Assembly in Wilmington, NC my health was in a terrible state. At the time, I thought I was suffering from a severe case of bronchitis but I was gravely in error. I could not make it from the hotel to our car (in the nearby parking garage) without having to stop several times to catch my breath and rest, before continuing to the car or other event locations. I was only sleeping a couple of hours at night due to awful coughing fits.

Once we returned home to Anniston, physicians in our congregation sat me down and gently demanded that I enter the local hospital for a full battery of tests. The next 5 days were a turning point in my life. It was discovered that I had congestive heart failure. My heart rate lying in bed was 140 and higher, normal should have been in the 70's. Echocardiograms of my heart showed massive failure and leaking valves. Nothing worked to bring my heart rate down until finally they stopped and restarted my heart. This worked and returned my heartbeat to normal, thank God. All sorts of other health issues were investigated, including possible thyroid cancer. (At present, that does not seem to be the case and I am being monitored over time.)

For six months after leaving the hospital, I had to wear a portable electric heart defibrillator. Since then, I have been on numerous medications including expensive blood thinners. The good news is that at my 6 month check-up, my cardiologist declared that I had improved greatly, would not have to have a pacemaker or defibrillator surgically implanted and could finally get rid of the portable machine I had worn 24/7 since leaving the hospital.

What made all of this more difficult is that I have no medical insurance. That is why I had resisted going for testing. Once my doctors seriously pushed the issue, I gave everything to

God and trusted Him to somehow work all of this out. And He did. Our sister church, St. Symeon in Birmingham, created a funding page for my situation on the internet and the hospital was unbelievably kind and helpful to me. Numerous financial miracles joined the medical miracles. After 5 days in the hospital, wide ranging extensive testing on most of my organ systems, consultations by a long list of specialists, the use of a portable defibrillator (\$3000 fee completely waived by the medical company providing it), a number of required medications including \$400 per month blood thinners, and post hospital care by several specialists - I owe NOTHING.

I continue to recover and have learned much as a heart patient. I have said many times that I would gladly go through it all again. It has had a tremendous impact on my spiritual life and has given me experience that has greatly deepened my understanding of the perspective of the sick and suffering. Now when I go to visit parishioners in the hospital, I go as one who has walked in their shoes. I especially thank the prayers of all of you, my brother priests, and the members of your beloved flocks and the unbelievably kind financial help that many of you and the medical institutions themselves gave to this little, unimportant, Orthodox country priest.

During my health crisis, we were blessed to have attached at St. Luke's my father-in-law, Fr. Stephen Rhudy, (retired from the Antiochian Archdiocese). He has been living here since his retirement in 2009. For several weeks he conducted the services, while I was recovering. In time I got better and returned to normal liturgical life. Then Fr. Stephen himself, began to experience his own health crisis. He was diagnosed with Stage 4 prostate cancer which had metastasized into his bones. Over the past year, he has undergone radiation treatments and is currently undergoing chemotherapy. He is on portable oxygen and is weak much of the time. Although he attends the divine services, he is unable to serve at the altar. His spirits are excellent and he is demonstrating to our parish how one truly gives everything completely to God in simple, trusting love. In the words of the beloved St. Porphyrios, accepting "whatever the love of God wills." He appreciates all of your prayers. His wife, Khouria Cecelia Jedonne, reposed in February of 2016. He looks forward to being reunited with her in the Lord's Kingdom.

### **Mission Life over the Past Year**

Glory to God that in spite of the medical struggles of her clergy, St. Luke Mission has continued to celebrate the Divine Services and take care of a dear and faithful flock. Over the past year, we received 5 new members through Holy Baptism and Chrismation. We currently have 14 Catechumens and a very lively catechumenate program. Three families who had drifted away from the mission over the past several years (one family having turned to Roman Catholicism) returned home to our mission and re-entered into very active parish life. Each of these was nothing less than a miracle in my grateful eyes. An average attendance at our mission is around 50 or so on Sunday mornings.

We saw record attendance at our Lenten, Holy Week and Paschal services. The number of volunteers on Holy Saturday increased so substantially, as to cut in half the normal time of preparing the temple for Pascha (to my ever-laboring Matushka's delight). One of our Greek families brought back a new paschal candle holder and icon stand covers from their last trip to Greece. The egg hunt following Agape Vespers, was much expanded from previous years and the many children, in full hunting mode, were a joyous spectacle. For the second year in a row, we rented a large outdoor tent and decorated it with a chandelier and twinkle lights, making the Paschal Feast a fantastic success. We had also added three new wooden picnic tables to our

courtyard in time for Pascha and for Sunday coffee hour. Our coffee hour is a full-fledged brunch each week, with everyone bringing food and spending hours following the Divine Liturgy in bright fellowship. Our people so enjoy being together that we decided to start something new. We began over this past year, to have a Game Night each month. We bought a multitude of various board games and families bring along their favorites from home. We get a bunch of snacks, treats and drinks and have everyone gather one evening a month at the parish hall and play games, talk and have fun for several hours. These have been a great success, especially with the children. Many adults come just to sit around and discuss spiritual and theological topics, while others join in the games. In addition to this, we started having a parish Dinner Night each month. We gather together on an announced evening at a local restaurant (a local Greek place is a favorite) and spend more time together. These Game Nights and Dinner Nights have proven very fruitful.

We continue to serve several daily services each week, especially Matins. Each Wednesday evening, I teach a class on various topics in Orthodox theology, spirituality, history and life. The class lasts about an hour and a half. During some years, I have made this time a study of a Biblical book but at present we are exploring a topical approach to the class. I set up in the temple with a podium, a dry erase white board, and a table for books related to the topic. I always prepare several handouts on the subject for the attendees to take home and investigate the topic further.

I have mentioned in past reports our Christmas caroling and visiting the local nursing home. One of the benefits of looking like "Santa Claus" is that the Holiday season becomes quite an exciting time for me. We take the choir from our mission, (along with lots of children) to the local nursing home and sing carols for them, hand out little gifts and candy canes to each resident and spread the joy of the Lord's Nativity to some folks in their twilight years. I especially love making the rounds to the bedridden residents and see the look on their faces when Santa Claus comes bursting into their room, in full suit, with children trailing behind, singing and showering them with love and gifts.

Just last week, we had our annual 'Day at the Lake' at the majestic Weis Lake in Leesburg, Alabama. One of our families is blessed with a wonderful home on the lake complete with an impressive deck, dock, swimming platform, boat and Jet Ski. The church families come out for a full day of fun, on and in the water, along with a rousing picnic spread for lunch. You can see many pictures from this and all of the other events I've described on our Facebook page: St. Luke Orthodox Christian Church.

That was something of our last year. "The Year that was Almost My Last." I am thankful to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit that He has seen fit to keep me at work in this little corner of His Vineyard for a little while longer. I am greatly looking forward to seeing all of you, with our beloved Bishop, at the upcoming Assembly in Chattanooga after having almost seen you for the last time at the last one.

Fr. Basil Henry

## **St. Mary of Egypt Orthodox Church, Norcross, GA**

### **Fr. Cyprian Durant**

St. Mary of Egypt Orthodox Church continues its steady presence in Norcross, GA. 2017 is our parish's 40th anniversary. This year, we were blessed to have Archbishop Alexander serve with us on our parish's feast day. At the Liturgy, Deacon Lazarus was elevated to Protodeacon, and awarded the kamilavka. Our treasurer, Nathan Klingensmith, was tonsured as a reader, and then ordained to the sub-diaconate. We had two baptisms and one wedding since last year's assembly.

Archpriest Peter Smith retired on December 31, 2016. We had a retirement party for him after Pascha to remember his years of faithful service. He continues to serve St. Tikhon's Mission in Chattanooga. Thank you to Fr. Peter and Matushka Anastasia for your 30 years of service in the Church. There are many parishes, missions, clergy, and parishioners that he has labored for over the years. Also, many priests got their start with him.

Archpriest Dimitri Oselinsky goes to Montgomery, AL twice a month to serve the mission there. Also, he assists at St. Mary's when possible.

Currently, we have 7 catechumens. Four of them will be received around the time of the assembly. Every Thursday, we have an adult book study. We are currently working through the Gospel according to St. Mark. We finished *The Arena* a couple of months ago.

We are now beginning our annual "Shoes for School" fundraiser in which we purchase gift cards for shoes for impoverished children. The local schools have expressed great thanks for this over the years.

Our parishioner, Taylor Hostetter, has a group of college students from around the country with him in Serbia. Part of the trip involves Bible study with Serbian peers. The trip was very successful last year, and has the support of Patriarch Irinej for similar efforts in the future.

With 40 years of use, our buildings are in need of some repair in renovation. We recently installed marble counter tops in our "sacristy" area. Remodeled restrooms are forthcoming.

Again, thank you, Fr. Peter!

## **St. John the Wonderworker Orthodox Church, Atlanta, GA**

### **Fr. Thomas Alessandroni**

Greetings from St John the Wonderworker In Atlanta. We have 121 members, 11 Catechumens, and lots of children, mostly under 3. There are so many babies at Sundays it is almost comical at times. Most people coming to church for the first time are favorably impressed by the number of young families with children, a rarity in many Orthodox churches.

We started our first Sunday school class using the Catechesis of the Good Sheppard, a Montessori type educational approach adapted for use in Orthodox churches. We are very blessed to have a parishioner, a long time Montessori teacher who has been trained in this method. The classroom is very beautiful and unique and we plan to add another class once a second teacher is trained.

This year we have received 2 adults by Chrismation and 9 children, mostly babies, by Baptism. We also had 7 adults who were already Orthodox. We had 3 weddings and 1 funeral. Attendance at Sunday services averages around 90 adult's attendance at Vespers around 15.

One of the highlights of the year was the Ordination of Fr Seth Earl in January during the visit of Archbishop Alexander. Fr Seth was a member of St John's Parish for several years before going off to St Vladimir's. He is currently back at St John's serving a yearlong internship. He has already been a great help with our Website and other technology.

We had a wonderful celebration for St John's Feast day this year with nearly 200 attending. In addition to many members of St Basil's Mission we had people from out of town and even from other countries come to pay tribute to our patron.

In August we will be presenting our 2<sup>nd</sup> annual conference sponsored by the local chapter of the Brotherhood of St Moses the Black. Fr Moses Berry will share his insights about Ancient African Christianity and African American Heritage. He is bringing an exhibit of artifacts from his Museum of slavery including rare photos of slave life destined for the Smithsonian collection.

St Nicholas Academy started a Kindergarten this year at the request of some the young families in the neighborhood. Most of them are not Orthodox but their parents were very appreciative of the loving atmosphere. In fact they are coming back as a first grade next year. In addition to the 20 students attending classes on site we have a number of homeschoolers receiving support and documentation including high school transcripts and diplomas.

Our Loaves and Fishes program continues to serve meals to about 65 individuals, 5 days per week. One of our parishioners is the director of a program which owns a temp agency with jobs for anyone who wants to work even if they are homeless or have a record. This has been a great asset.

We at St John's are very grateful for our many blessings. We know that with these blessings comes the responsibility to both represent and demonstrate the Love of Christ and the beauty and saving Grace of His Church. We pray that we may be up to the task. Thank you for your prayers.

## **St. Innocent Orthodox Church, Macon, GA**

### **Fr. Theophan Buck**

This past year things have been going well at St. Innocent Orthodox Church. Sunday attendance has continued to hover around 50-60 people and at times this swells to 70 or so. Of course, at Pascha the church is full. This year we have added a few inquirers and catechumens. We continue to have sporadic visitors; it seems that God is always sending people to us.

The day to day ministries of the parish continue. Church school is still going well and is divided into three groups. The choir meets regularly for practice and continues to grow in talent and ability. The prison ministry still meets weekly at Central State Prison in Macon. In prison our typical gathering has around 12 attendees. This year we updated our website to be mobile friendly. We continue to post sermons and classes on YouTube. We continue to have adult education classes on Sundays. Fr. Theophan continues to be regularly invited to the

local colleges to give presentations on Orthodox Christianity. Fr. Herman from St. Tikhon's Monastery gave our well attended Lenten retreat this year.

This past September we celebrated our 20th anniversary (since the founding of St. Innocent Mission). Archbishop Alexander joined us for our celebration and served the first Hierarchal Liturgy since the consecration of our church by Archbishop Dmitry in 2004. As part of this anniversary event we released a mini documentary which featured interviews with a few of the original founders. We also published a 20th anniversary magazine which gave a historical narrative of our past, present, and our future hopes and dreams. It was a blessed weekend.

This past year our main priority has become doing the work necessary to design and finance a permanent parish hall. We completed the design and financing work after Pascha and with Archbishop Alexander's blessing, construction of our new parish hall will start this (current) July and should take around ten months to complete. The plan is to have our fellowship hour at a local parishioner's house and possible other families will host as well. We have always felt constricted by our fellowship space. Church School and classes are often held at odd times to accommodate our lack of space. With the new parish hall, it is our hope that we will be able to host events and do greater outreach to our area.

As we head into our 21<sup>st</sup> year it is our hope that God would continue to grace us, guide us, send us spiritually hungry people and help us to do His work in the Middle Georgia region.

## **St. Symeon the New Theologian Church, Birmingham, AL** **Fr. Alexander Fecanin**

St. Symeon's in Birmingham will be celebrating its 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary in October, 2017 as one of the original missions of the Diocese's founding year.

This past year has been a year of new birth, literally, with 8 births and infant Baptisms! And there are 3 more on the way. There have been 8 adult converts also. There was record attendance for both Pascha and Palm Sunday.

It has also been a year of mourning, with the falling asleep in the Lord on January 12 of our beloved brother and concelebrant, Father Ignatius Crockett, originally of St. Symeon's and residing in Birmingham in retirement. *May his memory be eternal!*

One of our young men, Phillip Ritchey, will attend St. Vladimir's Seminary this fall.

One of our young women, Georgia Briggs, has written a novel, *Ikon*, published by Ancient Faith Press. It is the story of a young girl witnessing to her Orthodox Faith in an anti-Christian society. We highly recommend it! She is also one of our new mothers.

The St. Symeon Choir has completed a new CD recording of Hymns of the Nativity. (All St. Symeon's recorded music from the previous 5 CD's is available on YouTube and on all the on-line music services.)

It is the focus of our parish council going forward to aggressively meet our temple building debt obligations to the Diocese and financial lender, while still maintaining a full parish life, by God's grace and mercy!

We have a humble ministry to the homeless with some regular attendees at our fellowship hour meals following the Liturgy. Some of them work around the church for compensation.

**Holy Myrrhbearers Mission, Montgomery, AL**  
**Fr. Dimitri Oselinsky**

Great Vespers and Divine Liturgy is served two weekends a month. The average attendance at Vespers is 9 and for Divine Liturgy, 12.

Upon occasion we do receive visitors who are very happy to be with us. Recently we have been visited by a couple (Matthew and Galina) who are presently at Auburn University. There has also been a visit by a person (Kelly) who has moved into the Montgomery area and may be interested in a catechism study in the fall.

**St. Gregory the Theologian Mission, Tuscaloosa, AL**

St. Gregory's continues without a priest. Reader's Services are conducted with 10-12 faithful in attendance.

**Sts. Constantine and Helen Mission, Helena, GA**

Sts. Constantine and Helen has been faithfully served with Saturday liturgies twice a month by Fr. James Bohlman of Rincon and Fr. Theophan Buck of Macon. There are 10-12 in attendance.

**St Basil the Great Mission, Marietta (Atlanta), GA**

To be sent separately.