



A Brief History of St. Nicholas Orthodox Church, Endicott, NY *for our 50th Anniversary, 1970-2020*

How many times have we experienced a feeling of religious fervor, a desire to do something for God, to thank Him for all that He has given to us in this life, and for His promise of His divine love for all eternity? How many of us, touched by reading about a martyr's sufferings, desired to endure passion for Christ? How many of us, inspired by a visit to a sacred monastery, thought of joining one? How many of us, after reading about the hardships endured by people in disadvantaged countries, dreamed of going there as missionaries? How many of us have actually done any of these things? In the end, we realize that certain people are chosen for these particular tasks; through God's divine plan, though, we are all entrusted with the responsibilities and duties which He ordains for us.

For fifty years, St. Nicholas Orthodox Church has been a spiritual home to many devout Orthodox Christians. Here we are taught to love each other, to forgive each other, to help the sick and the poor, to live a righteous and moral life. Our parish has been battered, it has suffered, but it has endured and revived each time. We have been chosen for this work—to sustain the life of this House of God by attending services, receiving the Holy Mysteries of Christ, praying, singing, beautifying, teaching children, and by taking care of what is hallowed by every Orthodox Christian: the Bride of Christ in His Holy Church. This parish is our opportunity, presented by God Himself, to do something comparable to the asceticism of monasticism or the selflessness of missionary work.

This church is our collective podvig (spiritual struggle). This parish is our family to support. God has entrusted us with this Holy Temple—His Holy Temple—and it's by our love and sacrifice that we will continue to profess our Faith, to worship, to live, and to love under His pastoral care. It's not a martyr's sacrifice, but it's our sacrifice. They're not the spiritually heroic struggles of the saints, but they're our struggles.

And here tells the first fifty years of our story, with gratitude for those who have carried this church from its very seeds, through fertile soil, enduring the toils of tending, while reaping throughout the spiritual fruits of their labors.



Those first seeds of the parish were planted in the spring of 1968 when a number of the future founders of St. Nicholas Orthodox Church made a three-week pilgrimage to the Holy Land, starting before Lazarus Saturday and returning home after Pascha. On the eve of Pascha, by the Grace of God, Dr. Nicholas Petrochko received three tickets for entrance into the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, given to him by a Russian monk, Fr. Ioasaph, whose duty it was to care for the holy site. As the crowd gathered in the courtyard on Holy Saturday, it was doubtful that all ten members of their group would be granted access to witness the miracle of the Holy Fire. Dr. Nicholas escorted them in, two at a time, while never surrendering his original tickets. The young Israeli soldier posted at the doorway was cooperative and said with a smile, "I've never seen so many people enter on so few tickets!"

The pilgrimage group secured a place to stand, some within touching distance of the doors of the Holy Tomb of Christ. And soon, by the Grace of God, those doors opened to the miraculous appearance of the Holy Fire. Within moments, it spread throughout the crowd gathered in the church, candle to candle—even into the balcony. Without hesitation, Anna Bohush immersed her face and head into the new flame. Through this, they witnessed a property described by many others over the centuries: not one hair on her head or her scarf was singed by the miraculous fire!



Anna Bohush and the Holy Fire

Having walked in the very footsteps of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ in Jerusalem, and having participated in the miracle of the Holy Fire, this small group of pilgrims now carried within them a different sort of fire: a burning zeal to live a more devout Orthodox life, and to transplant that same zealous faith into their own American community.

In 1969, the Orthodox Church in America (OCA) was granted autocephaly from the Moscow Patriarchate. Because of the concerning, deeper ties that these two jurisdictions would soon realize under the shadow of Soviet Moscow, this event precipitated a small exodus of Orthodox faithful from the OCA. Michael and Mary Tarcha, among those who left their OCA parish, began attending services at the Church of the Entrance into the Temple of the Holy Virgin in Jamesville, NY, as well as Holy Trinity Monastery in Jordanville, NY, both within the jurisdiction of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia (ROCOR). The traditionalism of these ROCOR services moved them and offered them a glimpse at a greater depth within Orthodoxy than they had ever witnessed before. And with the blessing of Bishop (later Metropolitan) Laurus (Skurla), they were encouraged to start a new church in the Southern Tier.

Under Vladyka's direction, the Tarchas placed an ad in the newspaper to organize a meeting for anyone interested in starting a new parish. Fifteen people responded to the ad, and they met at the American Civic Association in Binghamton; some families that attended did not continue forward with the new church. The six families that did commit to the effort became the founders of our temple—eleven adults and thirteen children: Alexander and Anna Bohush and family, Lydia Monforte and family, Dr. Nicholas and Helen Petrochko and family, Daniel and Helen Petrochko, Michael and Mary Tarcha and family, George and Lydia Werbizky and family.



Archimandrite Panteleimon

The Tarchas knew a local Presbyterian minister, Charles Murn, who was interested in Orthodoxy. Many years prior, Mr. Murn was helped by a Greek Orthodox monk, and he never forgot that gesture of kindness. He also saw the ad for the organizational meeting. While he himself didn't attend, he did invite those families to use a small side chapel at Immanuel Presbyterian Church on upper Chenango Street in Binghamton. They held services in that chapel for that first year, served by Archimandrite Panteleimon (Nizhnik), co-founder of Holy Trinity Monastery. Mr. Murn eventually converted to Orthodoxy and took the name Basil when he was Baptized.

During their time at the Presbyterian church, the founders sought to purchase a building of their own. The first promising option was at 29 Riverside Drive in Binghamton: a lawyer's office with double stone walls that blocked all outside noises. This location was soon rejected as an option. At the time, the Episcopalians were motivated to sell off some of their properties so they could donate more money to the poor. Mary Tarcha found the church's current building and contacted the Episcopal bishop, Nathaniel Cole. She was given the price of \$20,000 for the lot and the church building. After some discussion, she returned to bishop Cole with an offer of \$10,000, and he accepted. By November of 1970, the parish had collected \$4900 towards the purchase: a ten-year, \$6000 mortgage through the Binghamton Savings Bank, offered through loan-officer Mr. Wignall.

In 1970, after the formal organization of the parish, two names were proposed for the new church: “St. Nicholas” or “Christ the Savior.” By majority vote, St. Nicholas was decided upon. In a letter dated July 15, 1970, Metropolitan Philaret gave his blessing for the parish to incorporate under the diocese of Syracuse and Holy Trinity of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia.

The church itself was built in 1923 as St. Michael’s and All Angels Episcopal Church, serving the West Endicott community. The wooden ceiling is original to the building. It was converted into an Orthodox temple with most of the work done by the parish family. The failing wooden entry stairs were replaced with stone and brick stairs, and a roof was constructed over the entryway porch. The pews of the former congregation were removed, although a few were retained as benches along the edges of the nave. The Episcopal altar was reappropriated as a candle desk. The amvon area was extended; Archimandrite Panteleimon provided the new altar table, the table of oblation, and three wooden candle stands; two parishioners, George Werbizky and Michael Tarcha, framed the iconostas, and Lydia Werbizky installed the iconostas trim and ornamentation. The Royal doors were constructed by Austrian cabinetmaker Mr. Bernhauer from a sketch provided by the parish. Lydia Werbizky and Leon Coval constructed the analoys and kliros stands. The iconostas originally had small paper icons hung in place of the four large icons and on the Royal Doors and deacon’s doors.



St. Nicholas Church, 2020

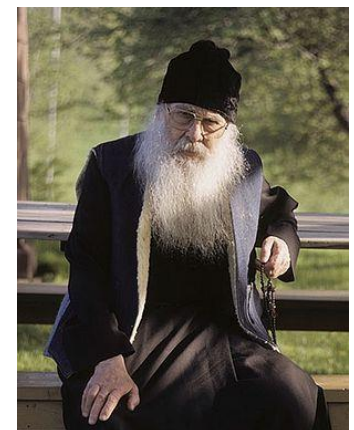
In 1975, parishioners visited the New Jersey workshop of Sergei Padukow, builder of fiberglass cupolas. He had one large blue dome and one small, gold-leafed dome already constructed and available for purchase. In October 1975, the parish rented a crane, Mr. Padukow delivered the domes, and with the help of George Werbizky and Michael Tarcha, Sr., the domes were installed atop the church and entrance roof, and both were bolted to the underlying roof supports. Mr. Padukow also applied gold-leaf to the cross above the entryway. Gold domes symbolize Christ and the radiance of His Heavenly Light. Blue domes are symbolic of the Theotokos, with stars representing her bearing of the Christ-child.



Memorial Monument

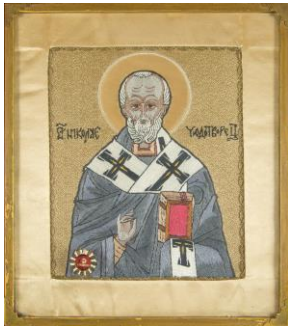
The church obtained a bell from Greece with the help of Bishop Laurus. The St. Vladimir memorial, complete with a bronze icon of St. Vladimir, was installed in May of 1989 to commemorate 1000 years since the Baptism of Russia into the Christian Faith (988-1988). The whole parish donated towards the purchase of this monument. The church sign was sketched out by Lydia Werbizky, then taken to a sign-maker, John Feeley, near Troy, PA. In December of 1997, the church provided and installed the aluminum uprights, and the sign-maker delivered and helped mount the completed sign.

After Archimandrite Panteleimon’s two-year service to the parish (1970-1972), Archimandrite Cyprian (Pyzhov), also from Holy Trinity Monastery, became the new priest, and he served bi-weekly Vigils and Liturgies from 1972 to 1973. When this talented iconographer saw the temporary paper icons on the iconostas, he promised the parish that he would provide them with proper, hand-painted icons. Two weeks after his offer, he delivered the four main icons (Christ, the Theotokos, St. John the Baptist, and St. Nicholas), and donated them without payment. He also provided the arch-shaped Protection of the Theotokos icon which originally crowned the center of the iconostas, but was later mounted in the narthex, its spot being replaced by an icon of the Holy Trinity. In 1979, Fr. Theodore Jurewicz, an apprentice of Fr. Cyprian, completed the iconography on the Royal Doors, the deacon’s doors, the



Archimandrite Cyprian

Mystical Supper, the upper tier of saints, and the Holy Trinity. Fr. Theodore painted the Archangels for another church, but the other church declined to purchase them. So the parish's first permanent priest, Fr. Rodion Laskowski, offered to purchase the pair for \$375; Lydia Werbizky constructed the frames and background pieces for them. Fr. Theodore also painted the Crucifixion icon for the Pannikhida table. Bishop Laurus visited the parish in 1980 to bless the completed iconostas.



Embroidered St. Nicholas Icon

Lydia Werbizky learned the art of icon embroidery from a family member. She embroidered the main St. Nicholas icon that now contains his relic. Silk thread was used because silk doesn't absorb moisture, and so will not warp with time as compared to other thread materials. Each session of embroidery brings a different level of strength and dexterity in the hands, and therefore variations in the tension of the thread; any pauses in the work will create unintended texture discrepancies and wrinkling. Because of this, the embroidery of the face is the most intense part of the process, requiring continual work from start to finish without a break.

The church obtained two icons from Mt. Athos: the main Theotokos icon for veneration, and a Crucifixion icon which is brought out for the Holy Friday services. These were shipped to the church by Fr. Seraphim (Bobich), the abbot of the then-Russian Prophet Elias Skete on Mt. Athos. When Michael Tarcha went to Mt. Athos with Bishop Laurus in 1974, he was talking with Fr. Seraphim about the new church, how they were still getting things they needed, how they had analogs but no permanent icons yet. And even though items are not usually allowed to be taken from Mt. Athos, Fr. Seraphim said that maybe he could send something, and it was left at that. A few months after returning home, these two icons arrived from Fr. Seraphim as gifts to the church for beautification and veneration. Memories from the time distinguish these icons as Serbian in origin, likely from the Serbian monastery of Hilandar on Mt. Athos. Upon consultation with iconographer and Protodeacon Paul Drozdowski, he confirmed that these are Athonite icons, typically painted in this style during pre-revolutionary Russia, from about 1850-1950. He noted no Serbian features on the Crucifixion icon. On the Theotokos icon, however, the inscription reads "Sladkoye Lobzaniye," which is a very literal translation of the Greek "Glykophilousa" - "Sweet Kissing." The standard Slavonic inscription for icons of this type is "Umileniye." He suggested that this might indicate a Serbian iconographer not familiar with this customary Slavonic terminology.



Mt. Athos Theotokos Icon, top
Mt. Athos Crucifixion Icon, bottom

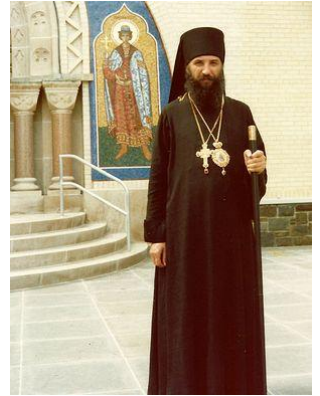


Sts. Martha and Mary Icon

In January of 1971, the Sts. Martha and Mary Sisterhood was established. It began with only two sisters: Mary Tarcha and Lydia Werbizky. As an act of service from the sisterhood, Mary and Lydia secured the first ongoing income for the church. Both were excellent bakers; Lydia made cream puffs and Mary made cheesecakes. Each Saturday morning, they brought their goods to the Grand Union grocery store in the Endicott Plaza. The manager let them set up a table at the front door, and it usually took only a few hours before all of their delicious offerings were sold! In 1992, the continuous and profitable income allowed the parish to block off North Page Avenue in front of the church to hold a fundraiser Children's Festival on the side lawn. Eventually the sisterhood held bake sales out of the church hall. These fundraisers allowed the establishment of an Endowment Fund in 1998 that would later sustain the parish through financial hardships. The Sisterhood also took part in the Broome County Ethnic

Festivals throughout the 1990s. In 1991, they purchased an icon of Sts. Martha and Mary, painted by Fr. Cyprian, which hangs near the kliros.

The parish grew and established their corporate prayer life over their first few years together. At the time, only three people out of the six families were Russian speakers. Fr. Panteleimon served exclusively in Church Slavonic, but the others looked towards having services in English. When asked about the best choice of language for the Divine services—if the parish should retain Slavonic for tradition’s sake, or should switch to English to help people better understand—Bishop Laurus counseled, “We’re not trying to save a language; we’re trying to save souls.” His wise guidance would help settle disagreements many times as the new church worked to normalize their worship and operations.



Bishop Laurus

Transitioning from Church Slavonic to English presented a challenge: in the early 1970s, English translations of Orthodox services were few and far between. In the beginning, the new parish knew almost nothing about setting up the services, and it was a steep learning curve, not only understanding the complexities of the liturgical rubrics, but also finding corresponding texts and musical settings in English. Some members even took Russian classes from one of the fluent parishioners, hoping to increase their knowledge of the available resources. Over time, service binders were compiled by Mary Tarcha who sought out existing musical sources, and by Lydia Werbizky who would transcribe musical settings and translations by hand. As the fruit of their dedicated labors, the church now has a complete set of services in English for the entire Liturgical year.



Parish Rectory

After about a year of praying together in their new temple, the house next door to the church came up for sale, seemingly the perfect opportunity for the acquisition of a rectory. Disagreements about its purchase delayed their action, and that house was bought by another buyer before the church could come to an agreement. Soon after, the EJ-house* at 420 West Wendell Street came up for sale, and the parishioners asked Archbishop Averky (Taushev) whether they should purchase it. He offered his advice: “If a church doesn’t have a rectory, it will never become a parish.” So the parishioners sought out banks for a mortgage. Charles

Teracek—vice-president of the Endicott Bank of New York and a man of Slovak origins—was sympathetic to their aspirations. He had fond childhood memories of regularly picking up the pastor of the John Hus Presbyterian Church in Binghamton each week for services. In addition, his church had just finished wrapping up the purchase of their own rectory building. All of these circumstances made him predisposed towards supporting the cause of this newly-established Christian community, and in December 1971 he accepted their application for a 25-year, \$20,000 mortgage: \$17,983 for the rectory, rolling that into the existing church mortgage which, at the time, was still about \$2000, and offset by \$2350 of parish donations. The mortgage was paid off in February 1992, four years before its maturity date. Then-Archbishop Laurus visited in May 1992 and served a hierarchial Divine Liturgy to celebrate the paying-off of the mortgage; Mr. Teracek was also in attendance for this celebration. Fr. Cyprian was the first person to stay overnight in the rectory each time he’d serve on the weekends.

As an established parish, St. Nicholas church was served by several different rectors over the years, listed below with approximate dates:

1970-1972: Archimandrite Panteleimon (Nizhnik)

1972-1973: Archimandrite Cyprian (Pyzhov)

1973-1977: Fr. Rodion Laskowski

1977-1985: Fr. David Hritcko

1985: Fr. Svetislav Mirolovich (served concurrently with Father David)

1986: Fr. Paul Volmensky

1986-1987: Fr. John Shaw

1987-1988: Fr. (later Bishop) George (Schaefer)

1989-2006: Fr. Thomas Maretta

2007-2009: Archimandrite Theophylact (Clapper-DeWell) (bi-weekly Liturgies with Typica served on alternating weekends)

2010: Fr. Matthew Williams

2010-2011: Fr. Kevin Kalish

2011-2015: Fr. Stephanos Shagoury

2015-present: Fr. Matthew Smith, Fr. Stavros Rousos (attached, retired)

Sometime in the late 1960s, two monks transported the Holy Fire from Jerusalem to Holy Trinity Monastery in Jordanville, NY. They were allowed to fly the light back to America in a small lantern. Anna Bohush later received the flame, and she and her sister Helen Petrochko kept it alive and burning in their home lampadas for more than fifty years: a remarkable commitment of faith in the hands of two pious believers. Completing the circle from the founders' initial pilgrimage to the Holy Land—their first-hand witnessing of the miracle—Anna brought the flame to our church for Pascha in 2011, and the altar vigil candle was lit from that Holy Fire.

In 2017, the Holy Fire was transported from Jerusalem to Moscow, and then from Moscow to New York City where it came to the Synodal Cathedral of Our Lady of the Sign (ROCOR). From there, it traveled to St. Alexander Nevsky Cathedral in Howell, NJ (ROCOR), where it was received by Joseph Zapach who brought it back to our area. A candle wick was cut down the middle; one half was lit with the previous flame (1960s) while the other was simultaneously lit with the new flame (2017). Both burned towards the center until they merged. This combined fire is kept burning in two vigil candles in the altar, and it lights the lampadas at every service.



Vigil Candle with Holy Fire

The parish experienced a period of growth and prosperity between 1989 and 2006, up to a peak of about forty parishioners and their children. Fr. Thomas Maretta became a stable pastor for the church during this time and was able to serve the complete cycle of services for each weekend and Feastday, in addition to occasional weekday services, especially during Great Lent. The kliros regularly had six to ten singers, spread from one end of the stands to the other. Three different age-level groups of church school classes were held in the basement each Sunday, along with occasional adult study group meetings. The Holy Trinity Monastery Bookstore provided books to the parish on consignment, and profits from the St. Nicholas bookstore were shared with the monastery. Bake sales became a regular feature of parish life, and they attracted crowds that lined up from the door to the curb waiting to purchase the sisterhood's delicious ethnic foods. This regular income allowed the parish to pay off the remainder of their mortgage in 1992. In addition, many upkeep and beautification projects were completed: finishing the trim work on the iconostas, air conditioners for the church, rebuilding the rectory garage and the church basement floor structures, replacing the roofs and remodeling the kitchens and bathrooms in both buildings, a new furnace, wall-to-wall church carpeting, installation of a multicolored stained-

glass window in the altar area, a cross monument on the side lawn, wall lampadas hung at each of the major icons, brass plates affixed to the exterior doors, the acquisition of the Baptismal and Holy-Water fonts, and new liturgical vestments—some purchased, some made by Lydia Werbizky.



St. Nicholas Church 2020

It was during these prosperous years that the church became an established, fully-functioning parish with regular services, meetings, a church school, choir rehearsals, and bake sales. And having achieved this internally, St. Nicholas also became an established, recognized part of the local community, both in its West-Endicott neighborhood, as well as within the community of Orthodox churches in the area. From the beginning, the parish wasn't founded on ethnic ties or cultural offerings. Instead, its charter members established a church with its foundations solidly rooted in the Orthodox Faith. And in doing so, this spiritual commitment helped the church weather the inevitable challenges and disruptions that it met along its journey.

At the peak of this renaissance, disruption unfortunately struck again. In December 2006, as a result of ROCOR's pending reunification with the Moscow Patriarchate, Fr. Thomas and approximately two-thirds of the parish members left St. Nicholas and established a church under an Old-calendar Greek jurisdiction. Archimandrite Theophylact (Clapper-DeWell) from Holy Trinity Monastery was assigned to the church in the interim, offering bi-weekly Divine Liturgies with parishioners serving the Typica service on the other Sundays. Fr. Matthew Williams and Fr. Kevin Kalish served for a brief time, during which attendance and membership stabilized, but both priests were soon transferred to other parishes. Fr. Stephanos Shagoury left the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America for ROCOR, and with his new assignment he became a steady presence in our church. Unfortunately, hardships continued, membership declined even further, and a skeleton crew, under Fr. Stephanos' guidance, kept the church afloat during this time, leaning upon the Endowment-Fund savings that past members had the foresight to establish and maintain for just such an occasion. Fr. Stephanos was eventually transferred to St. Nicholas Monastery (then ROCOR) in North Fort Myers, Florida, and the parish was without a priest for several months.

In 2015, Fr. Matthew Smith, along with his father-in-law, Fr. Stavros Rousos (retired), were assigned to our parish. Since then, through their prayers and under their guidance, our church has seen a slow but steady rebirth and blossoming. Some former members have returned, new members have joined, our service schedule has stabilized and normalized, and several beautification and adornment projects have been completed. In the early years of the parish, Bishop Laurus loaned the parish a Holy Trinity icon from Fr. Cyprian, and it hung on the east wall of the altar for decades. In 2018 that Trinity icon was returned to the monastery and replaced with a large canvas printing of a Resurrection icon painted by Fr. Cyprian. The domes were refinished with long-lasting automotive paint, retaining their original colors and symbolism. In the church, the walls of the nave were repainted, the furnace was replaced, the air conditioning was upgraded, and the basement hall was remodeled. Maintenance and upkeep of the rectory and corner lot also continue through the efforts of both parish members and residents in the local neighborhood.



Altar Resurrection Icon



Through its ups and downs, this parish has survived many challenges. Our podvig is not one of martyrdom, although there have been struggles and suffering. Ours is not the lofty spiritual heights of the greatest saints, although God's guidance and blessings abound. Ours is not a calling to monasticism, but we instead live our life of prayer in the world. Ours is not the way of missionaries abroad; instead we offer the example of our lives and our Faith to our local community. We stand unworthily on the shoulders of the saints and the martyrs, and by their prayers—and by the grace of God—we persevere: for the salvation of souls; for the proclamation of the Truth; heads down, hard at work, with gratitude for the struggle and the blessings; to the glory of God.

Fifty years of podvig, sprouting from our founders' labors, growing and struggling through the decades, bearing fruit throughout our history. And now ready to begin the next fifty years as St. Nicholas Orthodox Church.



Compiled by: Michael Tarcha, Helen Petrochko, and Joseph Zapach

**An EJ-house was built by the Endicott Johnson Corporation, a shoe-manufacturing business in the Binghamton, NY area that hired many Eastern-European immigrants and provided for the welfare of their workers through house financing, healthcare, and the construction of recreational facilities.*