

September 15, 2011

St. James of Westminster – The Making of a Mission

Almost a year ago now, an opportunity like no other was presented to a small group of people. An e-mail message sent by the then, Parish Council president of St. James was received by its parishioner's stating that a change in leadership at St. James was imminent. What was not exactly clear at that time was how imminent. Within the next 24 hours, that message had become a reality. St. James was without a Priest. Living in our high-tech world, what followed immediately, and what seemed like for days, was a flurry of e-mail activity amongst the parishioner's. Some expressing anger, some expressing sadness, others asking, "What do we do next"?

That following Sunday, the church was full of emotion. Our little sanctuary was full with parishioner's seeking answers. We were blessed with the leadership of Fr. Gregory Mathewes-Green of Holy Cross Orthodox Church, in Linthicum, Maryland. Fr. Gregory served the Divine Liturgy, and then followed with a question and answer time. While Fr. Gregory answered all of the questions to the best of his knowledge, the answers many sought were unfortunately not the answers they wanted to hear. As a result, many chose to leave the mission, a few chose to stay. Without a doubt, our parish was quickly becoming a parish-divided. The future existence of our mission was beginning to look bleak.

Having the first Divine Liturgy without a permanent Priest now behind us, the following week was a week of significant uncertainty. It was becoming clear that the day-to-day functions of the mission would have to be handled by a very small group of people. Only one of the six Parish Council members remained. Early in the week I was contacted by the area Dean of eastern Pennsylvania, Fr. Peter Pier of St. John Chrysostom in York, Pennsylvania. He asked if I would be his point-of-contact to St. James. Admittedly, with some hesitation, I agreed. "Do I have what it takes to do this?" and, "What have I gotten myself into?" are just a few of the questions I was asking myself. Approximately 4 people attended the Divine Liturgy that following Sunday. No question about it, everyone that chose to stay at this point would have a hand in the missions' success. With the upcoming Thanksgiving and Christmas holiday's approaching, could the mission at this point really survive? Read on...

The months of Sundays' that followed provided many challenges: a rotating schedule of visiting Priests intertwined with a temporary Priest, the re-establishing of a Parish Council, various administrative duties, and facility and financial concerns, just to name a few. Many Sundays' through the winter months saw maybe 6 people in attendance, including the Priest. Those in attendance all learned to sing, read the epistle lesson, take the collection, and assist the visiting Priest wherever possible. Not a Sunday was missed where 6 or so people "made a joyful noise!" And, since there were no regular weekday services being offered at the time, Fr. James Hamrick of St. John the Baptist in Thurmont, Maryland graciously hosted a Bible Study on Thursday evenings. Even on those evenings when our furnace was failing and we donned our finest winter coats, his presence helped to promote fellowship between our fellow churches, allow our facility to be open a little more often, and most importantly, spread the good word.



Fr. Gregory reads the Holy Gospel

As the season of Spring approached, we now had been under the temporary leadership of Fr. Gregory Oleary for several weeks. A new Parish Council was in place under the guidance of Fr. Peter, monthly Parish Council meetings were being held, the talk of the assignment of a new Priest was in the air, visits from our then “soon-to-be” officially appointed Priest were happening, and a sense of normalcy had started to return. Fr. Gregory was also able to visit most of our homes for our annual house blessings. Even our social hour was becoming, well, more social! Our attendance was still light, but week to week a few familiar faces were returning. In addition, a few new faces were visiting St. James for the very first time. Excitement could be felt amongst us with the occasional sanctuary full of parishioner’s!

With Fr. Gregory still at the lead, the Pascha holiday fell upon us with even more excitement. We could have chosen to limit our schedule of Holy week services, but all were in agreement that we should proceed forward with the full week of services, just as we had done in the past. Once the week was complete and looking back on it all, we were glad that we did. While it made for a tiring week, what a success and milestone it was for the mission to be able to offer these services and to fill our sanctuary with so many additional visitors and guests at this most holy time of year.



Brother Stephen receiving palms from Fr. Gregory

Shortly thereafter, the mission had received official word that Bishop Thomas, with the blessing of Metropolitan Philip, had appointed St. Vladimir’s seminarian graduate Fr. Raphael Barberg, as the Priest of St. James. With the already scheduled visit of Bishop Thomas for the end of June, the official upcoming arrival of Fr. Raphael, the departure of Fr. Gregory, and a chance for St. James to visit St. John the Baptist, the mission’s schedule was definitely filling up. The month of June was going to be busy. While we all had so much to thank our good Lord for these past few weeks, there was a lot of work ahead of us to be done in preparation for such a whirlwind of activity! Interim Parish Council discussions were had, schedules were reviewed, departure and arrival celebrations were planned, as well as the regular weekly Divine Liturgy. At the end of June, Fr. Raphael was officially installed as the Priest of St. James.

So now it’s been almost a year. Did people have their doubts? Absolutely. Are we ready to move into the next chapter in the life of St. James in Westminster? No question about it! In a recent inquiry, Fr. Gregory remarked *“I had a wonderful experience and good memories at St. James and look forward to chapter 2. I will continue to remember the parish in my prayers”*.



Fr. Gregory and the parishioner's of St. James in Westminster, Maryland

At the time of this writing, the mission of St. James, under the pastoral leadership of Fr. Raphael Barberg, is currently vacating its current space and has taken occupancy in a larger, multi-room 1st floor facility on Cranberry Road. It is on the opposite (north) side of Route 140 in Westminster, Maryland. We look forward to hosting all of our future visitors and encourage all of you to stop by!

In Christ, our True God,

Ron L. Williams
St. James Parish Council Representative