

# ST. THOMAS INDIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH

1009 UNRUH AVE, PHILADELPHIA, PA 19111

Phone: (215) 342 1500 Fax: (215) 342 2700

[www.stthomasphiladelphia.org](http://www.stthomasphiladelphia.org)

## NEWSLETTER

FEBRUARY 2018

VOLUME XXII ISSUE 2

### Vicar's Message

#### **From 1996 to 2018: Thankful 22 Years of Blessing!**

I thank God every day many times for many things including my service at St. Thomas Indian Orthodox Church for the past 22 years. In February of every year I have special thanks to God considering the blessings my family received from Him and the love I received from the parish. It may not be that exciting to others but for me it is a time of special experience to ponder on.

In January 1996 His Grace Mathews Mar Barnabas Metropolitan of the then American Diocese of blessed memory asked me to settle the dispute in the St. Thomas Malankara Orthodox Church (later the name changed to St. Thomas IOC). I am not getting into the details of the dispute. I could not reconcile the two groups in the parish. The church building was owned by a private incorporation comprising of some members of the parish. They shut down the church building. For a few months the parish members had to resort to other local parishes for worship. After I was designated to the parish, we rented the chapel of Cardinal Dougherty High School. The Metropolitan appointed me as the vicar. In fact, I was asked to go to another parish in New York area but that did not take effect as the members of that parish were unwilling to relieve their vicar.



When the Kalpana came to me to take over the Philadelphia parish, I shared that information with some friends, including priests. Many discouraged me. However, one senior priest told me bluntly, "Acha any parish needs a priest who loves it. Just go and serve them. You will be alright." I was glad to accept my assignment. But a move to Philadelphia was not easy because my family was fairly well settled in North Jersey. However, being a small parish of 28 families I took it over with joy and served it by weekend visits for five years, till I moved to Trenton, NJ.

February 18, 1996 was the first General Body in which the parish decided to maintain a loving atmosphere in the parish and to live in harmony with the rest of the local Orthodox and other parishes in and around Philadelphia. It was a perfect opportunity for me as I started experiencing

the love and care of a small parish. I did not do anything special except conduct worship and prayer meeting. In a short time I learned the names of all people. People were very enthusiastic and creative. In 1997 itself, a move for our own church building started. Later we bought 6 acres of land that we sold to buy the present property. We were only 76 families in 2004 when this present property was purchased. I privately prayed to God to bless and make the parish grow. Years passed and I realized one day that my prayer was being answered and we became the largest parish in the Northeast American Diocese. Today it is still like a dream to find me in the midst of the most loving people. That is why my gratefulness to God is simply enormous.

I cherish in God for the manifold achievements of our parish, credit only goes to God. No man can do it. We are now the largest parish of the diocese, we have the largest building among the entire USA parishes of the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church, we have the highest number of ministries in a single parish, we are the largest contributors to the Catholicate Day Collection in the USA (perhaps the second in the entire Mother Church, second to Dubai parish that has thousands of parishioners), largest contribution to the Orthodox Seminary, highest Diocesan Share to the Northeast American Diocese, we have the largest Sunday School, one of the highest number of people to take Holy Communion every Sunday, we had very efficient and honest Assistant Vicars and so on. If one considers these as gift of God, we have received the greatest gift from God. In addition, I can personally witness the blessings my family received from time to time by serving God even sometimes ignoring the family needs. I learned that God is in charge; when one attempts to do the will of God, “everything will be added on to you”. Even when we do commit mistakes, God shows mercy on us and continues to strengthen us if we trust Him always. So you can imagine what a blessing that I am enjoying with you all. You all must be aware of your own role in making our parish a great blessing to all.

This year, February 18th falls on a Sunday and my memories flashed back to 1996. I am sharing these stories of blessing only to thank God for His mercy and to compliment you all for your continued support and prayer for the parish. You are the reason for all blessings that flowed from God. We all must humble ourselves before God and stay in unity, harmony, understanding, and perseverance. In our parish, there are scores of people who work so hard, apart from the Managing Committees and Board of Trustees, from time to time to make a difference. The image that we created has come through much hard work. God will bless us more and more as we continue our Christian spirit.

Praise be to God!

Lovingly, Fr. M. K. Kuriakose, Vicar

## LENTEN THOUGHTS

This year our 50-day lent will begin on Monday, February 12<sup>th</sup>. The Orthodox Church considers the Lenten season the most spiritually enriching time. The Orthodox Church has not reduced the intensity of lent observance as time passed. Many mainland Churches have reduced the strictness on the lent. This very rich spiritual experience has been sustaining us in the past. It is expected that all our members will observe lent to the best of their ability.

How does the Lent help us?

1. **Time to Learn from the Lord:** The Lent brings home reflections on the public ministry of our Lord, His sacrifice on the cross and finally His Resurrection from the dead. We read the Holy Scripture with these themes in our mind. This trains us to learn more thoroughly on Christian ideals of life and experience. It is the time to be convinced of the salvific work of the Lord which has great implications on the world around us. When we learn about the Lord to the best of our ability, our quality of life will change. It is a great time of learning and conversion.
2. **Time to Experience the Lord:** During lent we have several disciplines that we undergo, like restrictions on all materialistic enjoyment, whether in eating or other kinds of enjoyment. We learn how to control ourselves in any given situation, like our anger, lust, or any such

emotional imbalance. Just as the Lord taught us, “Man does not live by bread alone.” When we are able to have a control over our life we will experience the Lord much deeper. The Lord taught us, “Where your treasure is, there your heart will also be.” Often we forget that we are going away from the Lord. But during Lent we become much more aware of the Lord because our worldly thoughts are all warded off and we come closer to God. That is an experience that will enrich us.

3. **Time to Repair Our Relationships:** The most important aspect of human life is mutual relationship. We all survive in peace and harmony as a result of harmonious relationship. The Lent begins with the special prayer called “shubkono”, which means forgiveness. In that special prayer, people embrace each other asking for forgiveness. Jesus says, “When you bring your offering to God, if you remember that your brother has some dislike towards you, go and reconcile with him and then come and give the offering to God.” Forgiveness is the key to happiness. We all go for confession during lent so that we are clean in our hearts and in our relationship with one another.

Lent is a great time of enrichment for us. We should observe it well and strengthen our life.

## PARISH NEWS – JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2018

**New Year's Celebration:** On January 1<sup>st</sup>, our parish celebrated Holy Qurbana followed by the handing over of responsibilities from the outgoing Managing Committee of 2017 to the incoming committee of 2018. The outgoing committee was congratulated by our Vicar for a job well done in the previous year and the new Secretary and Treasurer expressed their wishes for a Blessed 2018 at our parish.

**Danaha Service:** On Friday, January 5<sup>th</sup>, our parish celebrated the Feast of Danaha, or Epiphany, commemorating the Baptism of our Lord. Following the Service, the Blessed water was distributed to the Faithful for their nourishment throughout the year.

**Nineveh Fast:** For the three days beginning the evening of January 21<sup>st</sup>, our Church observed the Nineveh Fast in remembrance of the three days the Prophet Jonah spent in the belly of the whale. Evening Prayer was conducted each night and Holy Qurbana was celebrated on Wednesday the 24<sup>th</sup>.

**Great Lent:** Observance of Great Lent begins on February 12<sup>th</sup>. *See Lenten Thoughts from Fr. MKK on Page 3.*

**Prayer Meetings:** A new prayer meeting sign up list has been posted on the hall bulletin board. Please sign up to host at your convenience.

**Refreshments:** A new sign up list for our Achens' Sunday lunch is posted on the bulletin board. Please sign up at your leisure.

### FEBRUARY MEMORIALS:

**February 2<sup>nd</sup>-** His Grace Pathrose Mar Ostathios, Founder of the Servants of the Cross

**February 16<sup>th</sup>-** His Grace Geevarghese Mar Ostathios (2012), Metropolitan of Niranam Diocese

**February 23<sup>rd</sup>-** His Grace Thomas Mar Makarios (2008), First Metropolitan of American Diocese, 10<sup>th</sup> Dukhrono

**February 23<sup>rd</sup>-** St. Geevarghese Mar Dionysius Vattasseril, Saint and Great Luminary of the Malankara Church

### 2018 NEW SPIRITUAL ORGANIZATON OFFICERS:

**MMVS** Secretary: Bindu Sam  
Assistant Secretary: Lily Elias  
Treasurer: Omana Varghese  
Assistant Treasurer: Jessy Jacob

**MGOCSM** Secretary: Reuben Jacob  
Treasurer: Carolyn Cherian  
Public Relations: Shanya Alex  
Community Service: Sheenmarie Thomas

**OCYM** Vice President: Jiju Alex  
Secretary: Sujith Thomas  
Treasurer: Alex Babu

**FOCUS** Co-Coordinator: Libu Geevarghese  
Co-Coordinator: Anu Vergis

**GROW** Co-Coordinator: Deepa Thomas  
Co-Coordinator: Susan David

**MEN'S FORUM** Secretary: Ninan Jose  
Treasure: Joseph Vakkayil

### UPCOMING EVENTS:

**GROW Annual One Day Conference:** Saturday, April 14<sup>th</sup> at St. Thomas Indian Orthodox Church, Levittown, NY

**MMVS Annual Camp:** Friday May 25<sup>th</sup> – Sunday May 27<sup>th</sup> at Holy Transfiguration Retreat Center, Scranton, PA

**Summer Institute – “Syriac Liturgy: History and Theology”:** Friday, June 3<sup>rd</sup> to Friday, June 8<sup>th</sup> at Holy Transfiguration Retreat Center, Scranton, PA

**Family and Youth Conference:** Wednesday, July 18<sup>th</sup> - July 24<sup>th</sup> at Kalahari Resorts, Pocono Manor, PA

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## FEBRUARY WEDDING ANNIVERSARIES

Mr. & Mrs. Koshy Daniel	Mr. & Mrs. Oommen Geevarghese Panicker
Mr. & Mrs. Paul C John	Mr. & Mrs. Anil George Panicker
Mr. & Mrs. Thankachan P Daniel	Mr. & Mrs. Jiju Alex
Mr. & Mrs. Rajan C Padiyara	Mr. & Mrs. Mathew A.P George
Mr. & Mrs. Nelson O Panicker	Mr. & Mrs. Aji P Abraham
Mr. & Mrs. Jacob M Zachariah	Mr. & Mrs. Mathew N K.
Mr. & Mrs. Anto G Panicker	Mr. & Mrs. Simon Cheeran Ittikuru
Mr. & Mrs. George Varghese	Mr. & Mrs. Maliyil M Philip
Mr. & Mrs. N K Thomas	Mr. & Mrs. Bivin Varghese Pulivelil
Mr. & Mrs. Cherian V V.	Mr. & Mrs. Abraham Varghese
Mr. & Mrs. Ron Philip	Mr. & Mrs. George Joseph
Mr. & Mrs. Robin Philip	

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## FEBRUARY BIRTHDAYS

Anil T. Babu	Melissa Alice Abraham	Jayden Mathew
Jessly Alex	Evana V John	Jenny Raj
Samma Thomas	Tiby Raju	Philip Melavila
Sajan Benny	Rachel J. Jacob	Norah Mary Daniel
Binu Thankachan	Alex P Symon	Nathania Susan George
Roy Philip	Paul C John	Robin P. Montharayil
Varghese Baby	Aarianna John	Jacob P Chacko
Manu Varghese	Alexander Mathew	Sophy Mathew
Edwin Saji	Justin K Alex	Mariamamma Cherian
Simmy Aneena Jacob	Samma Varghese	Subi Mathew
Reeja George	Shibu Thomas	Leelamma Rajan
Jeena Jacob	Jiju Alex	Ashok Mathew Koshy
Joelyne Jacob	Jibin K Alex	Zarah Kurian
Sunil Raj Poovannal	Ezekiel Raju	Chinnamma Philip
Reni Nelson	Raji Aji	Binny Cherian
Steffin Manoj	Jimmy Thomas	Cherian Varghese
Sheena Vaidian	David Roy	Sally Thomas
Noel Stephen	Milly Philip	Joby George
Vinod Jacob	George Varughese	Leon Lynnson
Grace John	Mary Daniel	Jaisy John
Jaime M George	Abraham John	Susan Abraham
Gibson Thomas George	Alia Ann Bivin	
Cristia Susan Shibu	Teena Aliza Prince	
Aleyamma Varghese	Maya Kappil	



## Sunday School News

*Submitted by Binny Cherian, Principal*

*(Tel.: 914.708.7981, Email: cbinny@gmail.com)*

The Holy fathers of our church have planned so well, approach into the fifty day lent which is compared to a battle, and the precursor is the three day Nineveh fast. Do we really need to prepare and plan before we get into the battle? St. Paul in his letter to the Ephesians 6:12-13 talks about this “For our Struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, after you have done everything to stand.”

If the enemy is in plain sight, it is easy to defeat it, using physical strength; however the enemy that St. Paul mentions in the verse above, is not in flesh and blood, hence it cannot be fought and won with physical strength, moreover it is all the more challenging because the enemy lives within us in the form of all the vices we have gathered in our lives. What do we do then? Should we just give up and live our lives the way we have always lived, or make a u-turn and take back the control of our life and offer it to God as a sweet smelling fragrance. The Holy Bible tells us that such battles can be won only by strengthening one’s own spiritual strength, and the physical strength or readiness, which would be getting a control over the five physical senses in the body, Touch, Sight, Smell, Hearing, and Taste.

St. Paul, while reminding us of the battle ahead of us, has also suggested the solution on how we can win it, he tells us that in order to win this battle we need to be equipped with the armor of God, which is spiritual readiness, as given in Ephesians 6:14-18 “Stand therefore, having girded your waist with **truth**, having put on the breastplate of **righteousness**, and having shod your feet with the preparation of the **gospel of peace**; above all, taking the shield of **faith** with which you will be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked one. And take the helmet of **salvation**, and the sword of the **spirit**, which is the **word of God**; praying always with all **prayer** and **supplication** in the spirit being watchful to this end and all perseverance and supplication for all the saints”.

Let us now take a look at the physical readiness. We are all created in the image and likeness of God, in order to reflect his glory, however one of the biggest challenges we face now, or our ancestors in the past, has been channeling our five senses and using it for God’s glory. One of the many authenticating factors of the Holy Bible is that, while it contains the virtues of all the Holy men, it reminds us at the same time that some of them were weak and had fallen into sin. However, the Grace and Mercy of the father redeemed them from it and brought them back to him as his children.

Just like the fruit in the Garden of Eden that looked pleasing to the eye that caused Adam and Eve to sin there are many things around us that entice us to sin, realizing the fact that Isaac liked the taste of the stew prepared by Esau, Jacob his brother in order to receive the blessings from his father, disguised himself and deceitfully received the blessing meant for the first born, the sight of Bathsheba led David to lust for her and he sinned against God by ensuring her husband was sent to the front of battlefield in order to be killed so he could marry her, Uzzah touching the ark of Covenant in order to steady it when the oxen carrying it faltered in its step. Prophet Isaiah in his book tells us that the acts of disobedient people is like stench in God’s nostrils, an acrid smell that never goes away, in the book of Zechariah, the people refused to pay attention and turned a stubborn shoulder and stopped their ears that they might not hear. While our five senses can lead us to God in worship they should not allowed to act as a barrier to do the same. This is a good time, let us now start preparing for the Lenten season and work towards improving both, spiritual and physical readiness to equip ourselves for the battle against the worldly powers and authorities to win the war in order to be counted among those who are in the likeness and image of God.

The Sunday School Calendar will be published next month.

**Please remember to pray for the Sunday school Children and Staff in your daily prayers.**