Office of Communications

Orthodox Church in America Diocese of New York and New Jersey

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In response to the **"Vision for Our Future"** announced by His Grace, Bishop +Michael, and the launching of the related **Distinguished Diocesan Benefactors** program, the parish of Saint John the Baptist in Rochester NY has committed its support of an initiative to provide financial support to a seminarian from our diocese.

According to the parish rector, Father Ken James Stavrevsky, the idea originated in light of the parish's tradition of offering some form of outreach each year through which financial assistance is offered as a stewardship extending beyond the needs of the local parish community. "In the past," he said, "we have sponsored several missionaries in Kenya, Madagascar,



Tanzania, and Cameroon through the Orthodox Christian Mission Center; and we recently provided a flock of 5 sheep to a family in Africa through World Vision." In planning for the 2011 budget, the question of how the parish would respond to its historic desire to reach out in love by offering financial assistance was raised. The answer seemed at hand as Bishop +Michael was formulating a diocesan vision that identified three vital areas in need of support: 1) Support for mission parishes, 2) Support for existing (struggling) parishes, and 3) Support for seminarians.

Gus Platas was the Parish Council Warden when the decision was made to bring a proposal to the annual parish meeting on 19 September to offer a \$6,000 (\$500 per month for 12 months) seminarian scholarship during 2011. "When Father Ken suggested to our Parish Council that we adopt a family in the seminarian program," he said, "I was fully supportive. I knew our parishioners would be, too!" Indeed, the parish was responsive and supportive, approving the motion by an enthusiastic and unanimous vote. "We hoped to develop a relationship with our 'adopted' seminarian and his family," said Father Stavrevsky. "We want to keep them in our thoughts and prayerfully remember them by name in our services ... it's about more than just writing a check."

The recipient of the seminarian scholarship is the Markewich family: Matthew, Rebekah, Katherine (six months of age) and a child-in-the-womb expected this summer. A second year student at Saint Tikhon's Seminary, Matthew Markewich came to the Orthodox faith through the ministry of Father Peter Olsen and Saint Basil's Church in Watervliet NY. Born and raised in Nyack NY, he was raised with exposure to both Lutheran and Jewish traditions. While studying history at the State University of New York at Albany, he began a journey to Orthodoxy.

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"I began going to an evangelical youth group. After a few years, I had an experience where I came to understand that God was real, and I became very active as a Christian. This was in 2002. After about two years, I asked myself, 'Why do I believe my tradition of Christianity is true when it is at most only 500 years old?' I began researching Orthodoxy and Catholicism and came to believe the Orthodox Church is the original, and true Church. While in college, I was Chrismated at Saint Basil's Orthodox Church in Watervliet on December 10, 2006 by Father Peter Olsen."

Rebekah Markewich was a graduate student of history at SUNY Albany when she met Matthew. Her own personal journey to Orthodoxy was about to begin.

"I grew up on a sheep farm in Sprakers NY. I was raised Pentecostal and both my parents and grandparents were and are pastors. About three years ago I began looking for the Early Church after, ironically, reading a Pentecostal book. The following month I took a graduate class on the Early Church and also met Matthew ... the first Orthodox person I ever discussed theology with. It is funny to look back on, because we used to sit in the campus food court discussing theology. I thought Orthodoxy was interesting, but it was still very foreign to me at the time. I wasn't even close to converting. I actually wanted Matt to become Pentecostal! However, as I learned more I began to realize that the Early Church still did exist and it was Orthodox. About the time that I came to this conclusion, Matthew and I started dating. I was also Chrismated at Saint Basil's Church in Watervliet. We were married about a year later. Matt started seminary a month after our wedding. It has been a challenging, yet rewarding time in which God has been teaching us how to trust that He will always be there for us."



The parish welcomed the Markewich family to Rochester NY on 15-16 January. The visit included a reception social following Great Vespers on Saturday evening and the annual parish Ethiopian/Eritrean Dinner on Sunday following the Divine Liturgy. "We are all so very blessed," said Gus Platas, "and I knew that our parishioners would be glad to share our blessings by helping to support a seminarian family. After meeting Matthew, Rebekah, and little Katherine Markewich last week, I am so glad we are able to assist them as they pursue their spiritual calling." Marilyn Holthe, a recently received Catechumen, was thrilled by the visit. "It's always a warm feeling to be able to help people, but to have an ongoing connection with a young, Orthodox family and to be able to hear about their personal experiences while attending Saint Tikhon's Seminary is enriching and encouraging." She continued, "to see them in person, to touch them, to give them our gifts, opens my heart to this real family who wants to dedicate their lives to spreading the Word. It adds more substance to giving by exchanging a moment of love that remains with you for the length of the relationship, which I hope is

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forever. How blessed our Church is to have Matthew, Rebekah, Katherine and their expected 'little one' within our family!" In the words of another Catechumen, Rissa Webster, "We really enjoyed getting acquainted with the Markewich family! It was a blessing to witness their gratitude for the contribution from our parish, and their daughter Katherine was such a joy to be around. We hope to see them again one day!"

Following their visit to Rochester and return to Saint Tikhon's Seminary for the rigors of study and seminary life, Rebekah reflected on their challenges, their calling, and God's abundant blessings:

"During the semester, Matthew is often busy with the Mission Choir, traveling to various parishes. This semester he is also involved with other seminarians in visiting patients in one of our local hospitals. He is also trying to set up a local OCF. I work from home as a teacher's assistant for an online college, so I have had my hands full working and also taking care of Katherine, who is an active six month old. Over the past year and a half, there were several times when we were not sure if we could continue due to finances. Over and over again, God provided for us at just the right moment to ensure that Matthew could continue with his studies and I could stay home with Katherine. We have always been careful with money and made our best effort to keep up a savings account. After Katherine was born I had to cut back my hours in order to also take care of her. Unfortunately, it is not quite enough to live off of. We helplessly watched as our savings account slowly began to diminish a little more each month. We were so relieved when we were told that we had been selected by Saint John the Baptist Church in Rochester NY to be a recipient of their 2011 Scholarship. This scholarship covers exactly the need that we had. We are so thankful to the generous donors who made this possible. Our plan, God willing, is to return to New York where we both grew up. We want to work for the Church in whatever capacity that God sees fit. We love New York and want to see it a vibrant center of Orthodoxy."

Information and details about a **"Vision for Our Future"** and the **"Distinguished Diocesan Benefactors" program** (including the three major initiatives) are available on the diocesan website at: <u>nynjoca.org</u>

Parishes, organizations, and individuals are encouraged to participate in the Vision for Our Future and DDB program through their prayerful intentions and financial support. Contributions are gratefully accepted, and may be offered *on-line*! Updates and information about our progress in meeting the challenges set forth will be shared regularly through postings on the website.