

2012 Annual Diocesan Altar Server's Retreat – FEBRUARY 24-26, 2012

“Being Called to Serve” was the theme of the Second Annual Diocesan Altar Server Retreat held 24-26 February 2012 as nearly 60 participants gathered with Bishop Michael at Saint Basil's Academy in Garrison NY. Although the event occurred over the “Forgiveness Sunday” weekend heralding the beginning of Great Lent, it was a great turnout! Participants included 5 clergy, 9 adult chaperones, and over 45 altar server from 16 parishes within the diocese (also including a parish in Garfield NJ of the Moscow Patriarchate). Altar servers had the opportunity to “meet up” with old friends from the retreat in 2011 and to make new friends with those attending the retreat for the first time.

As we know, before beginning any type of work we pray! So, after participants got settled into their dorm rooms, enjoyed a pizza party fellowship, and some time for basketball in the gymnasium, everyone gathered in the beautiful chapel. His Grace, Bishop Michael and Father Jason Vansuch (Rector of Saint Vladimir Orthodox Church, Trenton NJ and Chairperson of the Department of Youth Ministry) led everyone in an Evening Prayers Service. It was truly inspiring to hear a choir filled with nearly 60 voices ranging in age from the youngest altar server to the most senior adult -- truly the present and future of our Church was present! The singing and readings for the services was under the direction of the retreat choir director, Father Stephen Evanina (Rector of Holy Assumption Orthodox Church, Clifton NJ). After giving thanks to God and asking His blessing upon the retreat and all participants, Bishop Michael welcomed everyone to the retreat and gave a beautiful homily on the importance of serving and being called to serve. Then, it was time for sleep following a long day and in preparation for a busy Saturday. On Saturday morning, in the midst of cold air and under a beautiful sky, the Divine Liturgy was celebrated by His Grace in the Chapel of Saint Basil. Serving with Bishop Michael were: Archimandrite Anthony (Director of Saint Basil's Academy); Archpriest Gary Breton (Rector of the Church of the Annunciation, Brick NJ); Deacon John Diamantis (Holy Trinity Orthodox Church, East Meadow NY); and about 20 altar servers under the direction of Sub-deacons Alexander Koranda (Saint Tikhon's Seminary) and Alexander Vlachos (Christ the Saviour Orthodox Church, Paramus NJ). When His Grace entered the Chapel, he was greeted by the altar servers who were lined-up on either side of the main aisle vested in their robes. An exciting moment for each altar server was the opportunity of serving with Bishop Michael over the course of the weekend and assisting the sub-deacons in vesting him before the Divine Liturgy. As one altar server put it: “This is cool!”

After breakfast it was off to sessions where participants -- divided into two groups -- learned the importance of serving and being called to serve. They also learned how to serve as a sub-deacon during a Hierarchical Divine Liturgy. While Bishop Michael was leading one group, Alexander Koranda, Deacon John Diamantis, and Alexander Vlachos led the other group. Following the morning session, participants had the opportunity for more fellowship in another game of basketball, exercising in the weight room, or going for a swim in the indoor pool. After working up an appetite, it was time for lunch. In the dining hall everyone enjoyed a Lenten lunch. It was then time for a group photo and back to learning! His Grace led another session on the importance of serving and being called to serve. He spoke of the importance of the Divine

Liturgy and how the altar servers are an integral part of the celebration. Following the afternoon session, more fun and fellowship ensued with two games of basketball, exercise in the weight room, and swimming in the indoor pool. As the day came to an end, all gathered in the Chapel of Saint Basil. Father James Worthington (Rector of Holy Apostles Mission, Lansing NY and Vice-Chairperson of the Department of Youth Ministry) and Deacon John Diamantis celebrated Great Vespers Service with the assistance of two altar servers. After the service, His Grace gave yet another beautifully inspiring homily, emphasizing the importance of serving and being called to serve. It was time to head back to the dining hall for dinner which was followed by an evening session. The session featured "Orthodox Jeopardy" led by renowned game-show host, Bishop Michael. Participants were divided into teams and answered questions based on their learning during the earlier sessions. The game was so intense and exciting that it even came down to a thrill-packed "Final Jeopardy!" One thing became very clear: these altar servers really know their stuff. Later that evening some participants packed-up and departed to return to their homes, while others enjoyed the rest of the evening catching-up with one another before going to bed. Sunday Morning the Divine Liturgy was celebrated by Bishop Michael, expertly assisted by a host of altar servers in the Chapel of Saint Basil. When His Grace entered the Chapel he was again greeted by the altar servers, lined-up on either side of the main aisle vested in their robes. Following the Divine Liturgy, since this was Forgiveness Sunday, Bishop Michael led everyone in the Rite of Forgiveness ... a profoundly moving experience for all. After breakfast, it was time to pack-up and depart for home. Despite a chill in the air all weekend, everyone had a great time. One young altar server said, "This is awesome! I can't wait for next year!"

It is always a blessing to see our youth come together, but it was more of a blessing to see the children come together and gather around their Bishop. And, for this we are truly grateful! I pray and believe that this retreat was not only a way to bring altar servers together but to inspire them to want to learn more about the importance of serving in the Altar of Our Lord and perhaps even inspire their friends to do the same. We are truly blessed here in our Diocese to have such a wonderful, loving, caring Shepherd and Hierarch in Bishop Michael! We express our sincere and heartfelt thanks and appreciation to His Grace for his blessing, leadership, guidance, and support for this years' retreat! We also express our sincere and heartfelt thanks and appreciation to Father Anthony and the staff of Saint Basil's Academy for allowing us to use their facility and for their help, assistance, hard work, and all they did to make our retreat a success. We also express our sincere and heartfelt thanks and appreciation to the clergy and adult chaperones that came up for the weekend to assist with the retreat. We also thank Michael Suchernick of Saint Vladimir Orthodox Church in Trenton NJ who served as photographer for the weekend ... I'm sure many will enjoy seeing his pictures! Of course, this event could not have happened if it wasn't for: parish priests and their support; parents who made arrangements for their children to participate; those who worked on the committee and all that they did to make it a success; and, especially enthusiastic altar servers who brought their joy and excitement with them. Truly, the weekend was a bright light in the life of our Diocese, where the future of our Church -- 'Called to Serve' -- was seen and heard enjoying fellowship with one another and their Bishop. Glory to God for all things!" Next Year's Annual Diocesan Altar Server's Retreat is scheduled for March 1-3, 2013 at St. Basil's Academy.