



## **The Blessed Matushka Olga Ministry, Honoring the Sanctity of Life**

### **2023 Diocesan Assembly Report**

Master Bless!

Your Eminence, Very Reverend and Reverend Fathers, Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

In August 2022, His Eminence Archbishop Michael blessed the formation of *The Blessed Matushka Olga of Alaska Ministry*, a ministry of the Diocese of New York and New Jersey of the Orthodox Church in America. This initiative was born out of a need to minister, in particular, to women. It strives to provide resources for women struggling with an unplanned pregnancy, pregnancy loss, infertility, abortion, sexual trauma or abuse, as well as pregnancy, adoption, and parenting. The ministry also provides resources to clergy, ministry leaders and family and friends to help them support women in need.

Whether clergy, clergy wives, or ministry leaders, whether or not we ourselves have experienced a pregnancy loss, infertility, an unplanned pregnancy or even an abortion, we will meet grieving women and men, mothers and fathers and even grandparents and siblings who need care. We can share with them the resources that are available and we can tell them the Church is there for them – that Christ and the Theotokos, the Saints and all those departed who pray before the throne of Almighty God, including Mat Olga, are their intercessors.

Often, when women are dealing with issues surrounding womanhood and motherhood, they can feel unheard, misunderstood or just uncomfortable talking about these issues to male clergy. This in turn can make it feel like the Church does not recognize issues that are particularly important to women. Here is where women in ministry can help clergy in providing additional care that is needed. And, in cases where we ourselves need care, we can turn to Matushka Olga for her prayers, as well as to these resources, to help find additional pastoral care for ourselves.

Here are just some of the resources available from the *Blessed Matushka Olga Ministry*:

- For **pregnancy loss** we have various services that can be used at the time of a loss or for a memorial. In addition, there is a *Service of Intercession for Parents Grieving a Miscarriage, Stillbirth, or Loss of a Child* that our parish uses every October 15 for Pregnancy Loss Awareness Day.

Historically, funerals or memorial services (panikhida/parastas) for unbaptized babies have not been served. But recently, several Orthodox jurisdictions have recognized that pastorally these services are needed and wanted. Through the mercy of the Church, several Orthodox jurisdictions have had services written to provide this care. In 2012, His Eminence Archbishop Michael blessed several services that can be used when a mother miscarries a child. These services, along with pastoral guidelines and other resources and articles, can be found at: <https://nynjoca.org/pregnancyloss.html> and <https://nynjoca.org/pastoralclergyresources.html>.

In addition, the Holy Synod approved the “Service after a Miscarriage or Stillbirth” in October 2015 that can be found here: <https://www.oca.org/orthodoxy/prayers/service-after-a-miscarriage-or-stillbirth>.

- For **infertility** there are some book recommendations as well as an Akathist Service that can be sung to Saints Joachim and Anna.
- For **unplanned pregnancy** there are resources to help the local parishes and clergy find services for women in need during a pregnancy. Just think – if each of our parishes supported a local crisis pregnancy center or a women’s shelter, what a blessing that would be!
- For **post abortion healing**, resources are provided to find help in healing. It is hoped that sometime soon in the future we will have Orthodox Healing retreat materials available, much like Project Rachel in the Catholic Church. If anyone is skilled and

interested in helping develop materials, please be sure to contact me at [dennise.kraus@gmail.com](mailto:dennise.kraus@gmail.com).

- **Sexual abuse/trauma/domestic violence.** National hotlines and other kinds of information are posted to connect girls and women to the care that they need. Many times these things are revealed in confession or in confidential conversations, and so it is good to be somewhat familiar with the resources available ahead of time. Asking Blessed Olga for her prayers in these circumstances can be particularly healing.

Statistics - <https://www.nsvrc.org/statistics>

- **Adoption** - resources and prayers are provided.
- **Pregnancy and Parenting** – links and book recommendations as well as prayers are provided for pregnancy and parenting.
- **Prayers** - recommended prayers are provided for different needs.

*A Service of Intercession for those struggling with an unplanned pregnancy, pregnancy loss, infertility, post abortion recovery, and sexual trauma or abuse* is currently served once a month in the New York City Deanery, alternating between Holy Trinity Church in East Meadow, New York and Holy Trinity Church in Yonkers, New York. It is hoped that in the future this service can be served throughout the Diocese so that it will be prayed every week. If your church is interested in serving this prayer service, let me know.

A prayer request form is also included on the website. I keep a list of all the parents who have suffered a miscarriage, stillbirth, or abortion; the names of the parents and their children are prayed at least once a year during the *Pregnancy Loss Service* held annually on October 15, which is National Pregnancy Loss Awareness Day. October 15, 2022 marked the 20th anniversary of this service being held; Fr Martin Kraus commemorated 186 parents and 1 grandparent along with 330 unborn children at the October 15th Prayer Service.

- **Pastoral/clergy resources** which includes *Pastoral Guidelines for Pregnancy Loss* and access to a database of women's health professionals who are available to

answer questions that might arise that require understanding of health care practices to better help guide parents in decisions that may need to be made as well as other resources and hotline numbers.

### **A look ahead...**

It is my hope that in the year to come, these resources will become more known and shared and that parish or at least deanery liaisons can be established throughout our diocese to facilitate sharing these resources.

I'd like to encourage parishes celebrate the *Service Of Intercession for those struggling with an unplanned pregnancy, pregnancy loss, infertility, post abortion recovery, and sexual trauma or abuse* on a regular basis. This serves to both pray for those in need but also is a way of highlighting our ministry and resources as well as a way of teaching, clarifying and living the faith.

An example on how to incorporate this in a parish is to hold a monthly service in connection with a women's fellowship or service day. This is what we've done at Holy Trinity in East Meadow. Over the past year we've not only seen the fellowship grow but several women have reached out for resources and care that they never knew existed before. These fellowships followed by prayer are great opportunities for women to share personal stories and receive love and care they are yearning for from the Church.

This upcoming year we hope to have workshops in each deanery explaining and reviewing the resources available that will also serve to connect those who have a calling in this ministry. Look for dates to be published later this year.

In this effort, I am thankful to be working with Father Vlad Zablotzky who not only has been a priest for many years but also has experience in ministering to women who seek healing after their abortions. Thanks be to God for our beloved Archbishop Michael, who continues to pray, support and encourage our efforts to do the work of the Lord!

This ministry is in its infancy and we hope to continue to grow and provide additional resources. Help is always needed. If you have any information or expertise you would like to share, please email me at [dennise.kraus@gmail.com](mailto:dennise.kraus@gmail.com) or email [frvlad@nynjoca.org](mailto:frvlad@nynjoca.org). May God bless this

ministry and the women who are in need, through the prayers of the Theotokos and Matushka Olga!

Glory to God for All Things!

Respectfully submitted with love in Christ,

*Dennise Kraus*

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