



**Diocesan Report – 2023 (Covering the period from October 1, 2022, to September 30, 2023)
St. Olympia Orthodox Mission, Potsdam, NY**

We are immensely grateful for the generous financial support of His Eminence, our beloved Archbishop Michael, and of the Diocesan Council. So much of what we report below would be impossible without the grace of God and your generosity and your faith. We thank you for this and for your prayers.

Liturgical and Sacramental Life

Because of your generosity, we were blessed to have Fr. Nikolay Khalimonov travel to Potsdam on Saturdays to serve Great Vespers and stay over night to serve Divine Liturgies Sunday mornings. Fr. Nikolay's heart-felt sermons strengthen us for the coming week. His love and warmth toward members of our parish, visitors, seekers and catechumens transcend any language barrier. Little-by-little, he has become more comfortable with English.

While Fr. Nikolay can only be with us on weekends, during the week there are reader's services at the Hermitage of St. Olympia in Edwards, NY, about 40 min. from Potsdam. This is the dwelling of Mother Sophronia (Hofstead), an iconographer and indispensable member of our parish. It is a blessing to have her prayers, and she truly gives generously of her time and talents as you will see below.

On Wednesday, March 29, 2023, His Eminence travelled to Potsdam to serve Pre-Sanctified Liturgy. He returned for Great Vespers and Divine Liturgy on July 24-25, 2023. We are so blessed to have him with us twice a year! We are a challenging distance from the Diocesan headquarters, yet he takes the time and effort to be with us, and we know His Eminence always keeps us close in his prayers.

Archbishop Michael's visit this past July was particularly meaningful. Led by His Eminence, we had our first parish Pilgrimage in honor of our church's patron, St. Olympia. We celebrated Great Vespers and a hierarchical Divine Liturgy. In addition to five chrismations there was the ordination of Sub-deacon Stephen Turner, now a seminarian at St. Tikhon's. We hosted about 80 people, including visiting priests, for dinner on Monday evening and lunch following the liturgy on Tuesday. This was an immense undertaking for our parish, and everyone chipped in to help make it possible. It was an amazing time!

This year we have had one baptism and the five aforementioned chrismations and ordination. Our attendance, especially at Vespers, is markedly higher than in past years.

The liturgical music at our Mission consists of a mix of Slavonic-based harmony, Byzantine chant, and Antiochian settings. We enjoy congregational participation. While the services are primarily in English, occasionally we will sing hymns, or repeat parts of a hymns, in other languages so that those coming from various ethnic backgrounds feel more at home in our Mission.

Our New Church Building

As previously reported, we began to transition to our new church in January of 2021. The building is in the Village of Norwood, Town of Potsdam, and was built in the mid-19th century. There is quite a bit of deferred maintenance. We continue to strategize which projects must be done professionally and which could be a “Project Potsdam.” As with any aged building, the list is extensive!

Some important projects that were completed this past year:

- The front steps were repaired and resurfaced, and shaky railings were replaced to allow good, strong support for those who depend on them.
- The exterior of the front entrance was scraped and repainted by volunteers from the parish.
- A new curb sign was donated by the Kiwanis Club and is ready to be installed.
- We now have a handicap-accessible bathroom on the lower level (completely functional but still needs painting).
- We added two portable air conditioning units to the sanctuary.
- All incandescent bulbs in the high ceilings of both the sanctuary and the large side room have been replaced by LED bulbs.
- Perhaps the biggest project has been the removal of the huge organ that had pipes covering the entire back wall of the sanctuary and extending to the height of the 20-ft. ceiling. Since we acquired the church, we had searched without success for a buyer. Finding none, the son of the original organ builder carefully dismantled and packed over 1000 individually labeled pipes to be used for future “organ transplants.” Due to the height and the precarious nature of the supporting skeleton, we need to hire a contractor to remove the elaborate wood structure that housed the various ranks of pipes.
- Iconographer Mother Sophronia (Hofstead) completed the fourth and final main icon for our iconostasis, an exquisite full-height icon of St. Olympia!

Projects in the works:

Sanctuary – now that the organ has been removed, beautification of the sanctuary has become a priority.

- Painting: The newly revealed east wall is partially unpainted and filthy, and even has some large graffiti. The original tin ceiling has flaking paint chips that are “raining” down. Due to the dangers of the height, a company has been engaged to repaint the sanctuary this December.
- Two full-height stained-glass windows that were original to the building had been completely hidden by the organ pipes and boarded over. They turned out to be a matched set to two others

on the north wall of the sanctuary. At present there is no light coming through them because exterior siding was also put over them. Due to the height, a professional contractor has been engaged to remove/re-edge the exterior siding so that light can reveal their beauty.

- Because there are no storm windows on these, as well as the two other stained-glass windows in the sanctuary, we are in the process of getting a quote for plexiglass to go over the exterior of all sanctuary windows, both for energy efficiency and to protect them.
- The carpet in the sanctuary and solea is worn, has holes, and does not extend to the large area that the organ had occupied or a smaller area where the console sat. We are considering pulling up the rug when the altar and iconostasis have been moved out for painting so that we can assess the condition of the hardwood below.
- Preliminary ideas/sketches for iconography appropriate to the unusual asymmetrical layout of the sanctuary walls are in the beginning stages under Mother Sophronia's guidance and with her expertise. Light plays such an important role in iconography, and this is another reason to reveal the windows early in the process.

Rear (Basement) Entrance - The approach to the back entrance to the church has cement steps and a concrete ramp. Both have shifted/sloped badly over the years. Because it will be some time before we can replace them, we need to make immediate adjustments for safety. We have requested a bid to install handrails on both sides of the ramp as well as to add non-skid runners.

Parish Outreach, Hospitality and Charity

We continue to host the local food pantry that operates out of the basement of our church. We support them not only with space, access and by covering utilities, but also with food donations. We also have pamphlets on Orthodoxy available for people to pick up or peruse as they come to pick up groceries.

Our Pascha celebration brings in visitors and guests. We break the Lenten fast enthusiastically as a large family with an impressive spread of ethnic foods following both the Resurrection Liturgy, and especially after the Agape Vespers when it is a full-fledged parish feast.

We updated and revamped our parish brochure. We pass these out at public events and have them available in the church for visitors, along with pamphlets and booklets about the faith.

We have catechism meetings for those seeking to learn more about the faith. Subdeacon Julio Gurrea has used post-liturgy time to get people together for this. We are having multiple copies of *Essentials of Orthodox Christian Belief* printed and bound for use during these sessions. At present, there are several seekers and one catechumen.

In conjunction with an increase of inquirers, we have restocked our small bookstore and reorganized/replenished our lending library.

In June, we had a booth at the Car Show/Craft & Vendor Show in Malone, NY. We posted enlarged photos of our new liturgical home. We had icons, pysanky eggs and Orthodox books for sale, and handed out our new brochures about our parish to those who showed interest. In September, we had a booth at the Norwood Village Festival where we also had pysanky eggs, icons and books. We also used this

booth to send people across the street to our used book sale that was set up in front of our church, and we also opened the church for informal tours.

When our Mission began, our bulletin was an important means of outreach and we had quite a few people on the e-mail list who were inquisitive and some who became “seekers” and later catechumens. After a respite of over a year, as of September 2021, with Dr. Peggy Wheeler returning as editor, we resumed this more extensive version of the bulletin, one that includes a strong spiritual component and information about the faith. It is once again an integral part of our growth.

Greg Kalicin continues to maintain our Mission website and Facebook page, both which have a donation button. He continues to tweak the layout and add to the content. Recently, we’ve also included a “wish list,” of needed items and this has also been fruitful. You can find us at <http://saintolympiaorthodoxchurch.org>

Liturgical music has served as an outreach for our parish in several ways. Dr. Jessica Suchy-Pilalis, our director of liturgical music and professor at the Crane School of Music, directed a 200-voice chorus in her chant setting of the Nativity Katavasia of St. Kosmas during the annual Crane Candlelight Concerts this past December. There were full houses for both performances (the theater holds over 1000 people), which were also streamed live. This was recorded for national rebroadcast on various PBS stations across the country during the coming holiday season. During rehearsals, Dr. Suchy-Pilalis spoke about the meaning of the hymns and the centrality of music in Orthodox worship. Probing questions from the students proved this to be wonderful outreach. Dr. Suchy-Pilalis also teaches the course, *Byzantium: Religion and the Arts in the Christian East*. As part of this course, students learned to chant/sing the entire Paschal midnight service from both staff notation and Byzantine neumes. They were a wonderful enhancement to our Resurrection service!

We also budget financial support another seminarian at St. Tikhon’s whose roots are at St. Olympia, Zachary Price. He encountered Orthodoxy when he was a student at SUNY-Potsdam. We are glad to support his journey.

Projects in the works:

- Mother Sophronia will give a presentation on iconography in April 2024.
- We are exploring the possibility of a movie night showing an Orthodox-focused film at the Norwood Public Library.
- We are searching actively for housing for a future priest so that we are prepared with suitable options when the time comes.
- We are engaged in conversation with a local cemetery to set aside a section for Orthodox burial.

Finances

Our current financial situation is stable, thanks to the Diocesan Grant that we are blessed to receive, and to the continued support of our parishioners and friends. A full report of monthly finances is on the agenda of every parish council meeting and an annual report is given at the Annual Meeting of the Parish. In addition to our weekly collection at services, we also receive donations from out-of-town friends and family members, sometimes through the PayPal button on our website. We have also had

"Giving Tuesday" appeals.

Balances in our bank accounts (as of 9/29/23):

Building fund:	\$35,371.42*	
Checking acct:	\$12,623.38	
Total liquid assets:		\$47,994.80

**We strive to keep a healthy amount in the building fund as a contingency. Both the boiler and water heater are extremely old.*

We are very grateful to all who support us, both from inside and outside of our Mission. We are particularly thankful to our Diocese and the Diocesan Council for faithful and continuing support of our Mission. You are vital to our existence and our vision for this parish. We would not be able to continue without God's grace and your support.

Respectfully submitted,

Jessica Suchy-Pilalis, D. Mus.
Parish Council President

