

Dear brothers and sisters,

The Lord bless you and keep you! I hope this letter finds you well, in the Lord, of course. I want to take this opportunity to formally introduce myself to you, although many of us have met and spoken to one another – I’ve already been in many of your homes for visits and house blessings, too – of course, this doesn’t necessarily mean you know much about me. And there are others, perhaps I haven’t had the opportunity to speak with as much as the others.

I am Fr Silouan, and I was born in Bossier City, Louisiana, but I grew up in Shreveport just west of the Red River, which acts as a border between these two cities. My wife and I also met in Shreveport, while we were working at a local coffee shop. We became friends and, as I hope is obvious, got married. We were married in the Greek Orthodox Church of St George in Shreveport, in 2011. Then our firstborn child Sophia was born about a year later in October 2012, followed by Genevieve in 2013, Christopher in 2015, and Brigid in 2017.

I was received into the Orthodox Church in 2009 as a catechumen, then chrismated a year later. I had grown up loosely affiliated with the Roman Catholic Church. My mother’s side of the family are Mexican immigrants and all Roman Catholic. My mother left the RCC just a few years before I was born, however, and we church-hopped occasionally. My mother was a single parent until I was about 10 years old, when she remarried, and I started attending a private Christian school. That was a real turning point in my life. My favorite class was “bible class.” We memorized lots of scripture and I couldn’t get enough. Sometimes we had guest speakers like missionaries that talked about how they were serving the Lord, which really piqued my interest. And I thought I might do that one day. I was a part of a small youth group at an evangelical church during my last three years of high school. After that, I didn’t attend church until I was almost 23 years old. The first church I visited after attending “Greek Fest” and being invited by the priest, was St George Greek Orthodox Church in Shreveport. I stepped into the divine Liturgy for Pentecost and just felt home...or, as I often tell people, I felt found by God.

My wife was a Roman Catholic and was a faithful member of her local church, even after we were married. Once we began having children, however, she converted to Orthodoxy. My wife has her own story about how she became Orthodox, so I encourage you to ask her about that. I won’t tell the story for her. And it is a sweet story if you ever ask her to tell you.

After my wife’s conversion, I was encouraged by my priest in Shreveport to consider studying at seminary. I had been serving with him as often as possible, both in and out of the altar. I also sang in the choir, read for the services, and so forth. Maybe I ought to at least investigate seminary, I thought. So, I completed my bachelor’s degree between the years 2016-2019. Before graduating I had applied to St Vladimir’s Seminary and was accepted. So, in July 2019, I quit my job, angered some family members, then we moved to Yonkers, NY in August.

I was ordained a deacon by Bishop Andrei of Detroit on Annunciation 2021. I then completed a full unit of clinical pastoral education at Catholic Health Mercy Hospital in Rockville Center, New York the following summer. Then in September, I was assigned as an intern at Sts. Peter and Paul Orthodox Cathedral in Jersey City, NJ, under the tutelage of Mitred Archpriest Joseph Lickwar.

And finally, when the Nativity recess came around, I was ordained by Archbishop Alexander at Holy Nativity parish on December 12, 2021.

In my final semester of the spring of 2022, however, our firstborn child, Sophia, became very sick. She was diagnosed with acute myeloid leukemia and spent nearly 6 months in the hospital before succumbing to complications from a stem cell transplant. The day she died is the same day we found out she was also cancer free. She passed away on the feast day of the Nativity of the Theotokos (September 8) and was buried on the Leavetaking of that feast (September 12) at Nativity of the Lord Monastery in Kemp, Texas. Some of you came with me and my family to her annual memorial last year, which is a memory I treasure.

The bishops and our diocesan leadership thought it would be to our benefit to move back to Shreveport and be attached to our home parish, so we moved. While at home, I completed my master's degree by extension, and was awarded the MDiv in May 2023. During that year I served as a supply priest for the Mississippi River and Southcentral deaneries: Ft Smith, AR down to Hattiesburg, MS and everywhere in between...including here in July of 2023. Maybe you remember? In August of 2023, my assignment status was changed from supply priest to assistant priest of Holy Nativity, but I still functioned as a supply priest. I was also under the tutelage of Archpriest Jason Foster during that time, who is dear friend and mentor of mine.

And now I have been assigned here as of August 1, 2024, mainly because there was a need, and I was available. Our dean, Fr David Bozeman, was encouraging of my idea that my family and I not remain in Shreveport, which was a feeling I had been grappling with since my daughter's repose. "Did we go through all that struggle", I would ask myself and my wife, "just for me to be a supply priest, maybe eventually having to work a secular job somewhere, and coming back to live in Shreveport?" I couldn't shake that feeling, so I asked to be assigned somewhere with a need. So, here I am to serve Christ, along with all of you, as long as the Lord will have me be here.

That being said, it means I will be new at full-time parish service, but nonetheless my time as a supply priest and assistant priest has given me a wide variety of experiences with different sized parishes and missions. I've seen how some parishes and missions thrive because of great enthusiasm, hope, and creativity; and I have seen how some became stagnant or even fizzled out because they lacked enthusiasm, hope, and creativity.

All these experiences I've mentioned have formed my intentions as the new full-time priest here at St Paul's, which mainly are spiritual growth (which we pray for in the Liturgy: "growth in life and faith and spiritual understanding"), and deeper cohesion amongst ourselves. Let me make it very clear to you, though, that the foundation, the driving force even, of spiritual growth and cohesion are Liturgy and Prayer. These two things are the true reality, or the Kingdom of Heaven, that drive away self-centeredness, worldliness, and hopelessness. They are the center of our lives as Orthodox Christians. They are how we truly live, in conversation with the Lord in which we learn to hear His voice and obey His Word. We are not here to accomplish anything except to participate in God's own life shared with us in Liturgy and in Prayer, own life shared with us in Liturgy and in Prayer, and to learn that all things have already been accomplished for us by Christ and in Christ.

Let me continue, then, and cover now some of my intentions for St Paul's regarding the organization of the parish, under three categories: liturgical (this is my main service and purpose for being here), then non-liturgical service and parish membership.

Liturgical:

- Matins – this liturgical service will be added on Sunday mornings, beginning at 8:30am, leading into the Divine Liturgy. It is part of the resurrection celebration cycle, which begins at Vespers on Saturday night, goes naturally into Matins Sunday morning, then culminates in the Divine Liturgy.
- 9th hour added to daily vespers and Great Vespers.
- Vesperal Liturgy for Great Feasts that fall during the weekday. Same idea as the Liturgy of Presanctified Gifts during Lent: have small meals up to noon, then fast in the afternoon until after the liturgy. This scheduling of these services is for building up our spiritual life and cohesion, so that instead of having liturgy on weekdays early in the morning, when many of you are working or are in school, we have a better opportunity to gather more of us together.
- Confession and the Eucharist: Let me say outright that the Holy Eucharist is the substance of the Church. This means that if you are Orthodox but have broken away from the Church, you should not receive it until you have reconciled and reunited with Her. There are many ways to break away from the Church: *disregarding* the Divine Liturgy on Sunday, avoiding it three times or more. Being absent for good reason is not the same: sickness and recovery, for a woman the 40 days after giving birth, and even call of duty, if you are a firefighter, for example. Egregious sins also make us break away from the church; which I hope you understand what that means, so I don't have to list them (murder, adultery, and the like!). But the root of these sins is one and the same: turning away from Christ, seeking our own way, which is to say 'we don't want to be a part of the Body.' When this spiritual darkness takes over our hearts, and we have broken away, then we need confession. And confession is the mystery which reunites us and reconciles us with the Church. For those who live a regular Orthodox life, meaning that they are regular participants in the mystery of the Holy Eucharist and confession, then they have a standing blessing to receive the Eucharist by their father confessor – which at St Paul's, is me. This means that confession for those who are in the church, is not a blessing to receive communion. It is how we return ourselves, our hearts, our minds, our attention, back to Christ. Neither is confession for the feeling of being made worthy to receive the Eucharist: we are never worthy to receive communion of our own doings. Christ makes us worthy. We seek confession not in order to receive communion, but to reintegrate ourselves into the body of Christ, to refocus our whole being on Christ. That is why there is no universal rule on how often you confess. Some people will confess more often in various seasons of their lives, while others less often. But that is something discerned between you and the priest confessor.

You do not judge yourself or determine things for yourself, i.e., you don't act like your own priest or spiritual pastor. So, we are to develop a "good conscience" which is centered on our regular participation in the mysteries of the church, and through prayer, being with Christ, focusing on Christ, and turning away from evilness, such as despair, self-judgment, and God forbid, self-hatred, we together with our priest confessor discern our spiritual lives. Never hate yourself, only the sin and darkness which is around you. We come to confession to meet Christ and His mercy, in real compunction, repentance, and **peace**.

- Children's confession – Children, usually, around age 8 are becoming rational enough to learn about confession and sin generally. They can learn also to fast on Sunday morning, just before the liturgy. It is a blessing to children, especially in today's world, for parents to begin gently speaking to their children about our human shortcomings and failings, and definitely our need for the love of God. This will enable them to spiritually mature and be self-discerning Orthodox Christians. This applies to us adults and clergy as well. Learning to have self-discernment and a good conscience is the beginning of knowing ourselves and seeing ourselves in the light of Christ.
- In Lent, I will schedule a class for young ones, mostly, who haven't confessed yet, and for those who have but maybe need help understanding better, as well as for adults who don't give themselves the gift of confession regularly.

Non-liturgical:

- Sunday school (a start date to be determined, but typically during the traditional school year, Labor day to mid-May, but not Sundays of great feasts). Children and teachers will meet one hour before Great Vespers on Saturday to learn about the faith, participating in Liturgy, learning our main hymns – God willing, to sing occasionally in the services.
- Catechism classes for catechumens, and those Orthodox who would like to relearn, revisit their catechesis. I will have two units: Fall and Spring. After an inquirer has attended for some time (usually 4-5 months regularly) and declare to me that they want to be Orthodox, I will receive them as catechumens, and they will simply begin the next unit of catechism. They will be offered both online and in person, depending on the subject.
- Office hours – twice a week, 9:30-11:30am on Tuesday, 2:30-5:30pm on Wednesday. Come by and talk or make confession in my office.
- General Cleaning: Before Pascha and during Advent.
- Denison Fall festival (others local festivals as well).
- "Fellowship Days" at church or a local park: October, New Years eve/day, over the summer break, etc., with pizza and soft drinks, sponsored by the church.
- Spiritual retreats to a local monastery (one for youth, one for adults)
- Special announcements on bulletin boards and weekly bulletins: news about parishioners that need help/assistance, the sick and suffering, those that have reposed, etc.

- Food drives, clothes and furniture drives, for any need in our parish and local Grayson county.
- Interviews with local media.
- Invite local college classes for visits.
- Social media: live broadcasts, along the lines of “What is Orthodoxy?”

Parish Membership

I sent out last fall the “time, talent, and treasure” card which contained a description of what – in simple terms – defined a voting member of the Church. But I want to expand on what a member of a parish means and also distinguish it from someone who is just a visitor.

A visitor is anyone who occasionally attends but does not contribute to the parish or form any kind of cohesion with the people. A member on the other hand is truly a *parishioner*, who is here participating in the mysteries of the Church, who is a part of the people, and who contributes in a variety of ways to the well-being of the parish through financial support and the care of our brothers and sisters in our midst. We are one body, and every part of the body is vital and important.

These are the concrete ways in which one is a member of a parish:

- Pledging annually one’s tithes and offerings. The “Time, Talent, and Treasure” card will be sent out in November for those Orthodox who meet the requirements which are stated in the by-laws and are written on the cards themselves. Pledging includes financial contributions, of course, but also our time (cooking for meals, cleaning up, greeting people before services), and talents (grounds keeping, maintenance, vestment care, prosphora baking, and more).
- Only people who have pledged and follow through with their pledges have voting rights at the Annual Meeting and can serve on parish council.
- The Annual Meeting is the ultimate decider on things, with the priest’s blessing and approval. If any decisions are disputed, they will be submitted for discussion and voted on in a general meeting scheduled at another date. *The Parish council is only the executive arm of the parish.*
- Time pledges also include serving on council, serving in the altar, greeting people, becoming a catechist, etc.

I will wrap up my report now and ask something of you. Please be patient with me and forgive me. My intentions will take time to implement and maintain in this church. Many of you have a living memory of Archpriest Michael of blessed memory, whom I did not have the privilege to know, who built this church with the grace and help of God, and laid an incredible foundation along with many others. So, it will take time to get used to having me here as the priest-in-charge. Part of getting adjusted to me and having a full-time priest is centered on avoiding two extremes: firstly, that you would expect me to speak to every part of your lives,

especially your personal lives, which I won't do (and honestly, I can't do), since this is beyond what priesthood is.

And secondly, the other extreme is anyone doing things independently of me, which cannot happen. Any intention that you might have for St Paul's, then, please bring it to me first. Our church will grow, and it will continue to grow beyond this year and even next God willing, which means that we will be susceptible to conflicts with scheduling, activities, initiatives, and so forth. Part of my role as your priest, is to make sure these things do not happen, and that we move forward together in the same direction, always looking to Christ.

The Lord bless you and keep you in His grace and love,

Fr Silouan Cohen