

A letter of introduction from Fr. Silviu, your parish priest

My dear brothers and sisters, I hope this letter finds you well in Christ! I am writing to introduce myself. Some of you may have already met me and even spoken to me, but that does not necessarily mean that you know much about me. Also, it is possible some of you did not have a chance to speak to me at all.

I am Fr. Silviu and, as of January 8, 2023, I will be the parish priest of St. George. I was born and grew up in Romania, just as my Presvytera Maria did. (I also completed my seminary education in Romania.) She and I, together with our then two-year old daughter Ana, moved to the United States in 1999, in order to pursue doctoral programs, she in nuclear physics and I in theology. This pursuit of academic interests has taken my mind away from my lifelong desire to be a priest. In 2007, upon completion of my doctorate in Old Testament and ancient Judaism, I became an Assistant Professor of Scripture at the University of Dayton, a private, Catholic college in Ohio, where I also received tenure and promotion to Associate Professor in 2015. Yet, mostly for health reasons, in May 2022 my Presvytera and I decided to move to the valley. She began her new employment in her field of cancer treatment in June, but I had to stay behind in Ohio to see through my fall classes which had already been filled. I quit my professorship at UD as of January 1, in order to be here with my wife. The university has still retained me for the occasional teaching of graduate classes and for supervising doctoral work, but all this part-time work will be online. I am now in the valley full-time. Back in the spring I did not know that you needed and were looking for a priest. In other words, my serving with you is the meeting of a need and of an availability. But now I am here to serve Christ together with you, for as long as the Lord will bless it.

In the midst of my academic service, I was finally ordained to the diaconate and the priesthood in 2012, by Archbishop Alexander (Golitzin), who had also been my first doctoral adviser in my studies at Marquette University. Since my ordination I have only served as a supply priest, in different jurisdictions and traditions (OCA, Romanian, Greek, Serbian, Antiochian, etc.). This means that I will be new at a full-time parish service, but nevertheless my travelling years gave me some very varied experience. I have seen parishes thrive and parishes die. Both things happened for the same reasons: enthusiasm and involvement on the part of the parishioners, or, alternatively, lack of them.

Many of my intentions for St. George are based on this experience and all serve the purpose of encouraging our spiritual growth and cohesion amongst ourselves. Let me just emphasize from the very beginning that, in my opinion, the primary engine of this reality—reality which the Lord Himself called “the kingdom of heaven” and therefore is a participation in the life of the world to come—is prayer and liturgy, which together form the antidote to self-centeredness and worldliness, which are the opposite of what the church, the kingdom is. Of course, by “prayer” I mean something much more than asking God for things, even spiritual things; I mean a conversation with God in which we learn to hear and to listen to His voice. Rather than finding God—in other words, rather than making something happen—this true prayer and its proper participation in the liturgy learn that we have been found by Him, they discover something that has already happened. Yet, we will speak of prayer and liturgy in many ways and in many other conjectures, as these topics far exceed the purview of an introductory letter such as this one. So let us move to more organizational things.

Here are some of my intentions in regard to the organization of the parish, listed briefly, under two different categories—non-liturgical service and parish membership. It goes without saying that my main service to St. George will be liturgical, so there is no need to detail that here.

Non-liturgy:

- “Baffle the priest Sundays” will be the first Sunday of each month from September to May: open discussions with teenagers and young adults under 25, after the Divine Liturgy, in the church, before the meal.
- Sunday school (from the Sunday after Labor Day to the Sunday before May 21, except for Sundays of Great feasts), kids and teachers to be dismissed after Communion (to teach children about the faith, about worship participation, including how to sing certain hymns by themselves, and other hymns with others). Children will sing certain hymns during the Divine Liturgy, hymns which they prepare at Sunday school (such as during Communion, or “Our Father”).
- Adult education: for those above 18, meeting once a month as a reading group in the evening, online and in person
- Catechetical classes for catechumens and also for the Orthodox who wish to revisit their catechesis, online and in person. Let me repeat: I will *not* receive into the Church any catechumen who has not attended catechetical classes, without exceptions.

- Office hours twice a week, for two hours each time (for the foreseeable future these will be on Mon between 1-3 and on Wed between 3-5), when people can just stop by to talk to me
 - The gift store will be officially open during office hours, the times to be displayed outside and on website, for anyone to come in for purchases
 - International festival in December, with all sorts of cuisines, preparation to start in August, sign-up lists with specific times and types of service. The same people cannot cook, clean, set up, and sell.
 - Update website
 - Two general cleanings a year, for all to participate, as volunteers: before Pascha (maybe Friday before Lazarus Saturday) and during Advent
 - Teach-in sessions for prosphoron, for those who would like to prepare it, in order to exchange ideas
 - Park days with all the kids in the parish and their parents, with pizza and soft drinks (to be sponsored by the church), fun activities, etc.
 - Youth retreat, once a year (at local monastery?)
 - Adult retreat, once a year (at local monastery?)
 - Golf day (once a year), led by parishioner who plays gulf, obtain group discount from gulf course and sell entry at full price, the difference going into the general fund of the parish
 - Invited public talks by guest speakers
 - “Liturgical workshops”: explanations on the liturgy, spread out throughout the year, on Sundays before the Divine Liturgy (approximately 9:30am), when they will replace the Hours. Instead, the reader will read the doxology just before the Divine Liturgy, during censuring.
 - Occasional monastery trips
 - Clean and fix playground (entry with passcode shared with parishioners)
 - Weekly bulletin, to be posted on Saturday on website and social media, emailed to people, and hard copy handed out by greeters on Sunday morning, containing:
 - Hymns for that day
 - Announcements
 - Schedule of following week
 - “One body”—in parish bulletins section with news about parishioners who need help (need can be anonymous): driving, cooking, cleaning for new moms, elderly, etc.
 - Special requests list: on bulletin and/or special announcements
 - Food drive/banks
 - Parish party with Presvytera Maria and Father Silviu sponsoring and cooking, on Pascha in the afternoon, after agape vespers (vespers at 3:00pm, meal at 4:00) with egg hunt for kids
 - Clothes and furniture drive for poor of our parish and of the local communities
 - Interviews with local radio, TV, newspapers, podcasts, etc.
 - Invite local college classes to visit
 - Social media: “Learn about the Orthodox faith” evenings, live broadcast
- Some of these ideas will take long to implement, some may not be viable at all. Yet, I think we ought to try all of them.

Parish membership:

First, let me draw a clear distinction between a parish member and a visitor. Someone who only comes to church for (certain) services but otherwise does not get involved in the parish in any other way and does not form any cohesion to the other people in the church is a visitor. As someone who grew up in the east, I realize how easy it is to form this habit of visitation. Serious parish involvement has been oppressed for decades in the east under communism (often together with church worship). And the last few decades, after the fall of communism, have seen a radical reverse of that reality: many Orthodox Churches in the east are supported by their civil governments in one way or another. Due to this world in which

churches don't close (and for many other reasons), it is very easy for us to form and maintain the assumption that the church is just there, very easy indeed to take the parish for granted.

Our American reality is very different; in our world churches are not forbidden but nor are they supported. In our world churches close all the time. I myself have served in Orthodox churches which are no longer there. Our St. George could disappear, too. Here in the States there is no other way for our parishes to endure except through the faithful being more than mere visitors. That is, being parishioners. The same people cannot carry the bigger burden of the work for too long and the finances cannot be two or three months away from insolvency. And we cannot ignore our own brothers and sisters who struggle. To be part of the same body means that everyone does something, regardless how seemingly little. I say "seemingly" because just like in a physical body, in the body of the parish every member or organ plays an important and even vital role. Without any one of them the body can only be incomplete and weakened.

Now to go, finally, to the concrete aspects of parish membership. Here is what I intend to do. I must confess these ideas reflect existing practices in many other parishes.

- Annual pledges of time and/or money will be sent out in December for those over 18 (pledges will be common for spouses). These pledges will have itemized lines for money (general fund, Sunday school, charity, etc.) and for time (greeters, cooking, cleaning, etc.). For 2023 they will go out in mid to late January. You will receive them shortly!
- Only people with a pledge and who follow through on their pledges are parish members and can vote on any decisions and can serve on councils.
- We will have two general parish meetings a year for decisions and updates, in June and in December (more meetings could be called for pressing issues). At one or both meetings the parish will be presented up-to-date reports on finances and service, so that everyone knows how their money is used and how the different time commitments go.
- The general parish assembly is the ultimate decider on things, with the blessing and approval of the priest. If the decisions of the parish council are disputed, they will be submitted for discussions and votes in the general meetings. The parish council is only the executive arm of the entire parish.
- At these meetings, whenever there is a need, parish members vote and elect the parish council and other councils, representatives to the All American Council, diocesan conference, etc.
- The bulletins at the end of a year and the beginning of the next, probably from November through February, will list the current sums of the pledges (without names, of course) and the goals.
- The time pledges will include service on the following councils (and possibly others):
 - Rotating but staggered service on the parish council (with time limit on service)
 - School council (made of the teachers), to decide on school matters, including use of school fund
- Other services which count for time pledges (on sign-up lists in hallway):
 - altar servers
 - greeters
 - potluck preparers
 - cleaners of church (every Sunday the church should be vacuumed after the Divine Liturgy)
 - cleaners of hall and church during general cleanings
 - prosphoron bakers

Soon you will receive a second, brief letter from me, accompanied by a pledge for 2023. Please fill out the pledge and be members in the body of Christ which our parish is.

Could you also please order on Amazon through the smile subscription of our parish? At no cost to you, Amazon will donate 5¢ or more to the parish with every eligible purchase you are making. For using this service on a browser, please use smile.amazon.com instead of amazon.com, and look for "St. George Pharr" in order to locate and add the church as your charity of choice. In order to activate this Amazon smile service on apps, please go to "settings" on the main menu and then to "amazon smile" and follow the instructions on the screen. Look for "St. George Pharr" in order to add it as your charity.

Finally, on Jan 8, as I will also announce in church that day, a list will be posted in the hall for anyone who wishes to sign up for having me bless their houses with the water sanctified that Sunday. Please write your name in the time slot which works for you. This blessing of houses is a wonderful tradition, but if none of those times works for you, come and see me and I can explain how you yourselves can bless your houses with the water sanctified that day.

Allow me to finish with a request. I know you have not had a parish priest in almost two years, since the falling asleep of Father Antonio of blessed memory. It will take time to adjust to having me here, which is perfectly understandable. One central aspect of this adjustment is the avoidance of two extremes. On the one extreme you could expect me to speak to all aspects of your lives, even personal lives, which I will not do, since this far exceeds the calling of the priesthood. On the other extreme, you may continue to act in the parish as a sort of independent agents of it, which cannot happen. Therefore, please pass by me every initiative and intention which regards the communal life of the parish. You will always be welcome to take initiatives on activities (at St. George or elsewhere), to extend invitations to fellow parishioners for activities outside the parish, etc., but *not* without my prior knowledge and blessing. After all, as your involvement in the parish and the Church grows—as I hope will be the case—it will be ever easier to create rifts and conflicting schedules. One of my fundamental roles as a parish priest is to make sure that such rifts do not happen, that we are all on the same page, and that we all pull the parish into the same direction.

For any questions, suggestions, or comments, please know that this is my contact info: father.silviu@gmail.com, cell phone (317) 362-2853. These are also the contacts to use for any emergencies.

With joy in Christ's love for us,

Fr. Silviu

On the day of the holy martyr Anysia of Thessalonica
Dec 30, 2022