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GIVING THE GIFT OF UNCONDITIONAL LOVE THIS CHRISTMAS

We hear much about God's unconditional love, especially at Christmastime. But do we really know what unconditional love is? If we are not careful, we might miss the message of this season, lost midst visions of sugarplums dancing in our heads. This is no time for fairy tales, to be sure. As Dr. Ashley Null reflects, it all depends upon what "unconditional love" truly is.

— Fr. John

Americans today often confuse unconditional affirmation with unconditional love. Unconditional affirmation is what your dog gives you. He simply affirms you without challenging your innate desire to be the center of your own universe. That's why it feels so good.

Unconditional love, however, is not the same as unconditional affirmation. Love creates a crisis. And the greater the love, the greater the crisis. For love reaches out for union. For implicit within the gift of love is a calling of the other into relationship. To accept the gift of love is to admit into our heart a power from outside ourselves that tugs at our very self-centeredness, seeking to draw us into relationship by stirring up in us a desire to love in return the one who gave us the gift of love. Yet, the price of this relationship is a dent in our self-sufficient autonomy, where our selfish ways have thrived unquestioned. And the greater the love, the greater the loss of the right to live for oneself alone. And perfect, unconditional love seeks to stir up an equally unreserved giving of all of ourselves to the other. In short, true unconditional love does not simply affirm us in our self-satisfied self-centeredness. True unconditional love provokes the ultimate crisis where we are called to die completely to our desire for autonomy and wholly give ourselves to the One who has already done the same for us.

The true meaning of the Gospel of Grace is this: that God unconditionally calls each of us to seek release from our selfish ways so that we can join the self-giving fellowship of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost, and his love is so at work in us to transform us that one day we will enjoy fellowship with God and one another as much as God enjoys fellowship within Himself.

EDITOR'S NOTE: The Rev. Dr. Ashley Null is canon theologian in the Episcopal Church. He is currently the Scaife-Anderson Fellow at St. Vladimir's Orthodox Seminary in New York.

RELIGIOUS LEADERS RELEASE HISTORIC DECLARATION

On November 20, 2009, Metropolitan JONAH and Fr. Chad Hatfield, Chancellor of Saint Vladimir's Seminary, joined a group of more than 150 prominent Orthodox, Catholic, and evangelical Christian clergy, ministry leaders and scholars in signing the Manhattan Declaration: A Call of Christian Conscience, a landmark document addressing the sanctity of life, traditional marriage and religious liberty. Signers of the 4,700-word proclamation pledged to adhere to their convictions, informing civil authorities that they will not—under any circumstance—abandon their consciences if the federal, state, and local government mandates abortion or any other anti-life act.

The full declaration can be read at manhattandeclaration.org. Visitors to the Web site also have an opportunity to co-sign the statement. To date, more than 235,000 people have done so.

Declaration Highlights

- *"We are Christians who have joined together across historic lines of ecclesial differences to affirm our right – and, more importantly, to embrace our obligation – to speak and act in defense of these truths. We pledge to each other, and to our fellow believers, that no power on earth, be it cultural or political, will intimidate us into silence or acquiescence."*
- *"We recognize the duty to comply with laws whether we happen to like them or not, unless the laws are gravely unjust or require those subject to them to do something unjust or otherwise immoral."*
- *"We will not comply with any edict that purports to compel our institutions to participate in abortions, embryo-destructive research, assisted suicide and euthanasia or any other anti-life act; nor will we bend to any rule purporting to force us to bless immoral sexual partnerships, treat them as marriage or the equivalent or refrain from proclaiming the truth, as we know it, about morality and immorality and marriage and the family."*

ST. NICHOLAS GIFT TREE RETURNS

Beginning this Sunday, December 6 we will again have the St. Nicholas Gift Tree in the Narthex adorned with ornament tags with gift requests from 40 people. The deadline for purchasing and dropping off gifts is Sunday, December 20. Thank you for your generous participation! Together, we can help brighten this Nativity season for needy families in our area.

MATTHEW 25 THANKSGIVING DRIVE SPONSORS 28 FAMILIES

By God's Grace and your generosity, Holy Trinity provided a full-menu Thanksgiving meal to all 28 families (120 people in all) identified by our partner, Strawberry Fields. During the three week food drive, more than \$1,400 in cash and \$200 in food items were donated, enough to pay for the entire order and a grocery gift card for each family. Thank you to all those who donated food items, money, and their time to share with those less fortunate.

DECEMBER SCHEDULES

	Coffee Hour	Greeters	Altar Servers*
Dec. 6	Karen Cattell Jean Miranda	Melody Thompson Mark Fedkin	Team B
Dec. 13	Russian Ladies	Megan Leathers David Swisher	Team A
Dec. 20	Leslyn Radomsky Julianne Vaughan	Shane Stevens Maria Stevens	Team B
Dec. 27	Melody Thompson Jenny Anthony	Beth Roberts Ed Miranda	Team A

* **Team A:** Dan Andresen, Chris Doty, Nikita Fedkin, Michael Haupt, Addison Miranda, and Samuel Oleynik. **Team B:** Joshua Cattell, Matt Doty, Pete Doty, Jonathan Miranda, Stefan Pelikan, and Jeremiah Stickles.

HOLY DAYS AND FASTS DURING DECEMBER

St. Nicholas the Wonderworker

Vespers—Saturday, Dec. 5, 6pm
Matins—Sunday, Dec. 6, 9am
Liturgy—Sunday, Dec. 6, 10am

Nativity of Our Lord

Vespers—Sunday, Dec. 20, 7:00pm
Vespers—Monday, Dec. 21, 5:30pm
Vespers—Tuesday, Dec. 22, 5:30pm
Vespers—Wednesday, Dec. 23, 5:30pm
Royal Hours—Thursday, Dec. 24, 10am
Vigil—Thursday, Dec. 24, 7pm
Liturgy—Friday, Dec. 25, 10am
Vespers—Friday, Dec. 25, 7pm
Liturgy—Saturday, Dec. 26, 10am

St. Herman of Alaska

Vespers—Saturday, Dec. 12, 6pm
Matins—Sunday, Dec. 13, 9am
Liturgy—Sunday, Dec. 13, 10am

Circumcision of Our Lord

Vespers, December 31, 7pm
Liturgy, January 1, 10am

Nativity Fast—Continues through December 24. *Omit meat and dairy (all days). Omit meat, dairy, and fish December 14-24.*

Fast Free Week—December 25 through January 4.

* *The Vespersal Divine Liturgy of St. Basil will take place at the Chapel of the Holy Spirit (350 Old Orchard Road in Beavertown) on December 24 at 2pm. All are welcome.*

YOUR PRAYERS REQUESTED

Please continue to fervently pray for the sick and suffering servant of God, Clay (Mark) Bond.

POINSETTIAS FOR NATIVITY

You may offer poinsettias for the Nativity by signing the list in the narthex. Each plant is \$10.00.

For the Record

BAPTISMS

- *Kristina Marie Fedkin, daughter of Mark and Katya Fedkin, baptized November 21, sponsored by Michael Pelikan and Galina Pavlov.*

COME CELEBRATE CHRISTMAS AT THE CHAPEL!

A little more than two weeks after their second-ever Divine Liturgy on the Feast of St. Nicholas this Sunday, Chapel of the Holy Spirit members will gather once again for another Eucharistic commemoration on December 24. The service, which takes place at 2pm, begins a new tradition in the life of the community while holding fast to the Church's Tradition, which prescribes that the Vespers Divine Liturgy of St. Basil the Great be performed in the afternoon on the eve of Our Lord's three greatest Feasts (Nativity, Theophany, and Pascha).



If you have not had an opportunity to experience this beautiful celebration, consider making a pilgrimage to 350 Old Orchard Road in Beavertown this Christmas Eve. It begins with the chanting of Vespers with its powerful "Lord, I Call" hymns (*"The wall which divided God from man has been destroyed..."*) and eight prophetic readings from the Old Testament, culminating with Prophet Isaiah's account: *"Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Emmanuel."* Immediately following the readings, the Divine Liturgy begins and we hear St. Paul's Epistle to the Hebrews (*"...He has by inheritance obtained a more excellent Name than [the angels]"*), announced by Psalm 2 (*"The Lord said to me: Thou art my son, this day have I begotten Thee"*), and followed by the Christmas narrative from St. Luke's gospel. Later, at the conclusion of Liturgy, the celebrant takes a lighted candle to the very center of the church and, surrounded by the entire congregation, intones the Festal Troparion and Kontakion,

Visit the Chapel of the Holy Spirit's Web site (www.holyspirit-oca.org) for more information and directions.

MEN'S BREAKFAST MINISTRY CONTINUES

Each month, Holy Trinity hosts a breakfast in the Parish Hall for all of the men in the church to grow in fellowship with one another and meditate on the disciplines of a godly man. The gathering is free and open to newcomers. This month's event takes place on Saturday, December 12, at 9am.

CONGRATULATIONS GRADUATES!

Many years to Katie Radomsky and Kat Atty, members of the Class of 2009 who will graduate Penn State this month. We wish you great success in all your future endeavors!

GREATER LOVE HATH NO MAN THAN THIS...

Last month, Fr. Daniel Sysoyev, an active missionary, preacher, and writer, was brutally murdered at his parish church in Moscow. The day after his death, Patriarch KIRILL presided at his funeral and praised his missionary work, which was known throughout Russia.

It is widely believed that Fr. Daniel will join the ranks of the new Russian martyrs, murdered by Islamic radicals as revenge for converting many Muslims to Orthodoxy. In a recent interview, Fr. Daniel spoke openly of his goal to convert non-Christians to Christ, which he admitted offended many: "The news that Orthodoxy is the universal faith, to which all nations are called, is still considered scandalous... [A missionary] should never hesitate to say that [he is] right and they are wrong... There should be rejection of falsity, but love for man."

Speaking of her husband's death, Mat. Yulia Sysoyev echoed this sentiment: "Those who shot him wanted, as usual, to spit in the face of the Church, as once before they spat in the face of Christ. They have not achieved their goal, because it is impossible to spit in the face of the Church... They killed him like the prophet of old—between the temple and the altar and he was indeed found worthy of a martyr's calling. He died for Christ, Whom he served with all his strength."

The forty-day memorial service takes place on December 29, the eve of Fr. Daniel's namesday and the patronal feast of the missionary church he was building in Moscow to minister to the large non-Christian, non-Russian expatriate community that lives there.



Faithful attend the funeral of Fr. Daniel Sysoyev, a leading Russian Orthodox missionary to non-Orthodox Christians, Muslims, and atheists, who was murdered November 19.