

# THE TRISAGION

THE MONTHLY NEWSLETTER OF HOLY TRINITY ORTHODOX CHURCH

## A Cave and Manger Received Him



An early Nativity depiction from a 4<sup>th</sup> century Milanese sarcophagus

### The Icons 365 Project

In place of the traditional “liturgical Christmas list” this year, I am most happy to announce the beginning of a multi-year initiative that I am calling “Icons 365.” The plan with this initiative is to invest in 365 8x10” (or larger) icons for every day of the Church Year, and to match these icons to service texts. The overall goal would be that any time we might come into the church, we would be able to greet an image of the saint we are commemorating on that day as we prepare to sing his or her praise in the hymnography.

For 2026, we are going to start with the beginning of the Church Year: the month of September. Initial internet research has turned up that icons are commercially available for saints and feasts on at least 26 days of the month, and the parish is already in

possession of five of these icons. So assuming we might need some original iconography to be created, roughly \$2000 should be sufficient to cover the whole month of September.

If everything goes to plan, by next year we will be able to pray before icons of saints such as the Prophet Moses, the righteous Zechariah and Elizabeth, Kassiani the Hymnographer, Joachim and Anna, the Apostle John, Thekla the Protomartyr and many more.

For those who would like to contribute to this effort financially, a link will be available on the website soon. For gifts by check, please include “Icons 365” in the memo line. If you wish to donate a specific icon personally, please speak directly with me on the matter.

- Fr. Ignatius

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## Schedules

	COFFEE HOUR	GREETERS	TELLERS
Dec 7	J. Cassar, N. Shaub, M. Stevens	M. Fedkin & K. Bazilevskaya	K. Cattell & M. Fedkin
Dec 14	Russian Ladies Group A (Katya F.)	R. Patel & Mat. K. Oleynik	G. Cattell & M. Stickers
Dec 21	M. Leathers, L. Georgiou, D. Patel	C. Pelllock & M. Leathers	M. Fiori & B. Haupt
Dec 28	Christmas Holiday Potluck	T. & M. Chambers & A. Stickers	M. Fedkin & H. Torbic
Jan 4	TBD	M. Fedkin & K. Bazilevskaya	TBD

## ■ ORTHODOX SPIRITUALITY

# Protect the Jewel: Reclaiming Marriage as a Precious, Lifelong Covenant

An article published some time ago by a Russian Orthodox priest, Fr. George Maximov, titled “The Biggest Mistake in Premarital Relations,” served as the inspiration for this reflection. The pastoral analysis it offers, while directed at a specific domestic audience, raises universal questions that resonate deeply in the West.

In the United States and Europe, living together before marriage is no longer a fringe choice; it is the statistical norm. The prevailing cultural wisdom suggests this is a pragmatic, necessary step—a “test-drive” for compatibility. In fact, a majority of Americans (between 50-65%) believe that cohabiting *improves* a couple’s chances of a successful marriage.

For Christians—be they Orthodox, Catholic, or Protestant—this creates a profound tension. Is the Church’s ancient teaching on chastity and marriage simply outdated, or does it contain a truth that our modern “pragmatism” has missed?

This is not an article intended to shame or condemn. It is a sincere attempt to explore this question, motivated by a desire to share a perspective that is both ancient and, as we will see, strikingly modern. It is a warning, offered in love, for those who are genuinely seeking a truth that leads to lasting joy, not temporary convenience.

The core of Fr. George’s argument, and the argument of the Church, is not just that cohabitation is a “sin,” but that it is a *failed* foundation for the very thing it claims to build. And today, Western sociology is beginning to prove that the ancient Patristic wisdom was right all along.

### 1. The “Test-Drive” Myth: What Western Sociology Is Discovering

For decades, sociologists have noted a “cohabitation effect”: a correlation between living together before marriage and a higher risk of divorce. For years, this was debated. Many argued it was a “selection effect”—meaning, the kinds of people who

cohabited were simply less traditional and more prone to divorce anyway.

However, cutting-edge research has revealed a far more profound and specific danger.

The work of Dr. Scott Stanley and Dr. Galena Rhoades at the University of Denver has identified what they call the “**pre-engagement cohabitation effect**”. Their 2023 study, published by the Institute for Family Studies, is staggering. Analyzing marriages from 2010-2019, they found:

- Couples who lived together *before* getting engaged had a divorce rate of **34%**.
- Couples who only moved in *after* engagement (or after marriage) had a divorce rate of **23%**.

This means the “test-drive” group—those who cohabit *before* a formal commitment—are at a **48% higher risk** of divorce.

The reason for this is a powerful concept they call “**Sliding vs. Deciding**”.

- **Deciding:** A couple makes a conscious, deliberate choice. They get engaged. They get married.
- **Sliding:** A couple “slides” into the next stage without a deliberate choice. Moving in together is the classic “slide.” It often happens not out of commitment, but for convenience or financial reasons.

The “slide” creates what sociologists call “**inertia**”. Once you share a lease, a pet, and a bed, breaking up becomes much harder. This inertia can “push” a couple into a marriage that they might not have chosen otherwise. The “test-drive” doesn’t help you filter out a bad match; it often *traps* you with one.

This sociological data serves as a stark, secular confirmation of a deep spiritual truth.

### 2. The Christian Projection: Why “Official” Marriage?

This brings us to a foundational question: Why does the Church insist on “official,” publicly registered marriage as the *only* projection of the union God blessed at creation?

*(continued, see MARRIAGE, facing)*

## ■ NEWS & NOTES

### Nativity Season Open House

Pdn. Mark and Mka. Kelly warmly invite the parish family to their home to continue the joy and feast of the Nativity. Please join them on Sunday December 28th from 2:30 PM to 5:30 PM for an afternoon of fellowship, conversation, and light refreshments. Their home is located at 125 Wildercrest Ln. in Port Matilda.

### Vestments for Dn. Evan

Our parish’s seminarian, Dn. Evan Ashmore, is entering the final semester of his seminary training and could use some help with the purchase of priestly vestments as he prepares himself for ordination and his life after seminary. He has already placed his order, and a generous donor has covered a significant portion of it. However, just over \$630 of the bill remains, and he could use some support. If anyone would like to help him with this or other expenses, please speak with Corielle Stickles.

### Holy Supper

Holy Supper is a traditional Lenten meal on Christmas Eve, the last meal of the Nativity Fast. We will continue this annual parish family tradition by bringing a favorite Lenten food and sharing it with all that are present. The supper will begin at 4:30 PM on December 24<sup>th</sup> in the parish hall. For those who may not have attended in the past, this is not a normal “potluck.” It is a structured meal that includes specific foods and fun traditions and is especially enjoyable for children. If you have any questions, including food ideas, contact Pdn. Mark or Matushka Kelly. To sign up to bring one of the traditional foods for the meal, please see the signup sheet in the basement.

### Ordination to the Diaconate

By the grace of the All-Holy Spirit, the Holy Synod has given approval for the ordination of Sbdn. Michael Stickles to the Order of the Holy Diaconate. His ordination will take place at a special divine liturgy on Saturday, January 3 at 9:30 am. A small reception will take place afterwards, with some additional celebration to follow on Sunday the 4th. Axios! He is worthy!

### Calling All Christmas Cookie Bakers!

Do you like to bake Christmas cookies? Add a little Christmas cheer to those in need this Christmas! We are looking for 13-14 bakers to make 30 dozen homemade Christmas cookies to add to the CommonFood December food distribution. For more information, please contact Leoni Georgiou at leomcfar@comcast.net or at (814) 280-7599. If volunteering to bake, please let Leoni know by Friday 12/5. Cookies will need to be baked & given to Leoni for packing by 12/17.

### Saint Nicholas Tree Drive

Our Saint Nicholas Tree drive enables the disadvantaged in our community to receive gifts through the Matthew 25 Ministry’s partnership with Strawberry Fields. This year we will be providing gifts to those who might not otherwise have any presents to open on Christmas. Each tag on the tree has the recipient’s age, gender, and wish. To participate, take a tag and bring the wrapped gift(s) back with the tag securely fastened. The deadline for dropping off gifts at church is Sunday, December 14<sup>th</sup>. Thank you!

### Pre-Nativity Vespers and Confessions

During the week before Nativity, beginning Friday, December 19th and concluding with the Vigil of Nativity on the 24<sup>th</sup>, vespers will be served each evening at Holy Trinity. Confessions will be available after each one of these services, as well as by appointment. Please take this time as the Nativity Fast draws to a close to cleanse the house of your own soul as we prepare for the birth of the King of Glory in human flesh!

### Christmas Poinsettias

Please consider making a donation toward buying the poinsettias for the nave in memory of a loved one or in thanksgiving to God. All commemorations will be printed in the Nativity bulletin and those who sponsor poinsettias can take them home after the New year. There is currently a sign-up in the narthex, as well as online. Thank you!

■ ORTHODOX SPIRITUALITY

# Marriage

is a “great mystery” (*mysterion*), an **Icon of the union between Christ and His Church** (Eph. 5:32).

An icon must be *true*. The union of Christ and the Church is:

1. **Public** (He acknowledged His Bride before the world).
2. **Covenantal** (Sealed with His own Blood).
3. **Sacrificial** (He “gave Himself up for her”).
4. **Permanent** (“I am with you always”).

Cohabitation is a *false icon*. It is a *lie* about God. It takes the physical act of “one flesh” and *divorces* it from the public, sacrificial, permanent covenant. It presents a false image of a “Christ” who “slides” into a relationship with His Church, “test-drives” her for convenience, and reserves the right to leave.

This is why it is a grave sin. It’s not about breaking a rule; it’s about distorting the very image of Christ’s love.

The line, therefore, is not “in the heart.” In Orthodox theology, this is a false dichotomy. We are a faith of Incarnation. A “faith in the heart” that refuses the outward act of Baptism is no faith at all. Likewise, a “love in the heart” that refuses the outward, public, covenantal act of Marriage is not *agape* (sacrificial love). It is something else.

**5. Pastoral Wisdom: From Excuses to Truth**

This brings us back to Fr. George’s pastoral insights, which so perfectly expose this gap between intention and action.

**The “Perfume Tester” Analogy:** Fr. George uses a powerful, if stark, analogy: in “testing” yourself, you become a “perfume tester”—something everyone tries, but no one wants to buy; they buy the sealed bottle. This may sound harsh, but it is precisely what the University of Denver sociologists found. The couple that “slides” into a “test” is 48% more likely to be “returned” (i.e., get divorced) than the couple that remains “sealed” until the public commitment.

**The “It’s Just a Paper” Excuse:** The most common excuse Fr. George hears is, “We have love. The stamp in a passport is just a piece of paper”. His pastoral reply is sharp and true: “If it’s ‘just a paper’ that means nothing,

why are you so stubbornly refusing to get it? Your very refusal proves it *does* mean something. It means you are keeping your options open and that you see this person as a temporary variant”.

This exchange reveals the truth. The refusal of the “institution” is not proof of a superior “heart-love”; it is proof that the love is not yet covenantal.

**The Bishop’s Test:** Fr. George shares a final, profound pastoral story. A young couple, living together, came to a bishop, insisting, “We have *such love!* We can’t live without each other! We just can’t marry *yet.*” The wise bishop replied, “Excellent. Prove this great love. Live as brother and sister, without sexual relations, until you can marry.”

Fr. George notes, “**They ran away from each other within a week.**”

What they had was not love. It was what the Fathers call “lecherous madness”—an addiction to a passion that they mistook for love. When the “drug” of sin was removed, the relationship collapsed.

This is the ultimate test. True love, the kind a marriage is built on, is not tested by sexual compatibility. It is tested by *sacrifice, patience, and chastity.*

**The House Built Upon the Rock.** The world, in its supposed wisdom, tells us to “slide”. It offers a pragmatic path that, according to the best modern data, is a high-risk trap. It encourages a “test-drive” that is statistically more likely to end in a crash.

The Church, in Her ancient wisdom, calls us to “decide”. She calls us to a path that seems “hard” but is, in fact, the only one built on a rock-solid foundation.

The choice is not between an old rule and a new freedom. It is the choice between an “inertia” that leads to instability and an “honor” that builds a precious, lifelong Covenant. It is the choice between the “water” of a temporary arrangement and the “wine” of a sacramental, grace-filled life.

*The above was taken from The Catalogue of Good Deeds, a publication of St. Elisabeth Convent Obitel-Minsk. It was written by Anton Zaitsev and published December 2, 2025.*

■ ORTHODOX SPIRITUALITY

# Marriage

The answer is that, from its very inception, marriage was never a private affair.

When God institutes marriage in Genesis, He says, “Therefore a man shall **leave** his father and his mother and **cleave** to his wife, and they shall become one flesh” (Gen. 2:24). In our modern, romantic-focused lens, we focus only on the “one flesh” part. But the first two actions are the prerequisites:

1. **“Leaving”:** This was a public, social, and economic act. It meant publicly leaving one household to form a new one.
2. **“Cleaving” (or “being joined”):** This is not just an emotion. The Hebrew word, *dabaq*, implies a formal, binding, permanent bond.

This public, binding act is what theology calls a **Covenant**, and it is profoundly different from a modern “contract”.

Covenant	Contract
Public & Witnessed	Private Agreement
Lifelong, Permanent	Conditional, Temporary
Based on a Vow/Oath	Based on Mutual Benefit
Secured by God & Community	Secured by Law

Cohabitation, at its very best, is a private contract. Marriage is a public covenant. When Christ attended the wedding at Cana, He wasn’t blessing a private arrangement; He was blessing a **public wedding feast**. His first miracle was to transform the “water” of a natural, social institution into the “wine” of a divine, sacramental reality.

**3. “Honorable” vs. “Legal”: Cohabitation and Hebrews 13:4**

This leads to the practical, modern question: What about forms of cohabitation that *are* legally recognized? Many Western European countries have registered partnerships or civil unions (like the French PACS) that grant most of the legal rights of marriage. If it’s registered, what’s the difference? And how does this square with the biblical command, “Let marriage be held in honor (*timios*) among all” (Heb. 13:4)?

The Greek word *timios* does not just mean “honorable”; it means “precious,” “costly,” “valuable”. The command is to treat marriage as a precious jewel, to *distinguish* it from what is common.

- **Unregistered Cohabitation:** This fails the test immediately. It is, by design, *not* public and *not* a binding covenant. It holds the “exit door” open.
- **Registered Partnerships (PACS, etc.):** This is the more subtle challenge. The key difference is their **intent**. These legal instruments were *explicitly designed* to be “marriage-lite”. Their primary feature is not permanence, but *ease of dissolution*. They are, by definition, dissolvable *contracts*, not lifelong *covenants*.

To “honor” marriage as *timios* (precious) means to *protect* its uniqueness. When the state, or even individuals, equate a “marriage-lite” contract with the lifelong, sacred Covenant, they are not honoring marriage. They are *dishonoring* it by treating the precious jewel and the common gravel as one and the same.

The state, by “legalizing” cohabitation as an equivalent to marriage, is not protecting the institution; it is actively diluting and destroying its *timios*—its precious, unique, and sacred public witness.

**4. The Bright Line: Where is the Grin of Sin?**

This brings us to the most vital question: Where, exactly, does the line between a sacred union and the sin of *fornication* lie? Is it in the heart (our personal intent) or in the institution (a piece of paper from the state or Church)?

The Orthodox Patristic tradition is unambiguously clear. This is not a gray area.

- **St. Basil the Great (4th Century)**, in his 26th Canon, states it plainly: “**Fornication is not marriage, and not even the beginning of marriage**”.
- **St. John Chrysostom (4th Century)** is even more direct: “**Fornication is not preparation for marriage, but a state opposite to it**”.

Why such a hard line? Because for the Apostles and Church Fathers, marriage is not just a social contract. It

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*(continued, see MARRIAGE, next page)*

