

# A HISTORY OF THE ARCHDIOCESE OF PITTSBURGH AND WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA

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*“...the more I study the history of the Orthodox Church in this land, the more convinced I become that our task here is God’s task, that God Himself helps us.”<sup>1</sup>*

— St. Patriarch Tikhon, Farewell Address, March 7, 1907

## Introduction

The history of our archdiocese is inextricably bound to the larger history of Orthodoxy in America. What is now known as the Archdiocese of Pittsburgh and Western Pennsylvania began in 1916 with the tonsuring and consecration of Fr. Alexander Dzubay as Bishop Stephen, within the former North American Diocese of the Russian Orthodox Church. His situation, in terms of being an immigrant of Carpatho-Russian ethnicity and a convert to Orthodoxy from the Byzantine Catholic (Greek Catholic) faith, was in no way unique at that time. However, it provides us with a glimpse of the evolving religious landscape and the foundation that was laid for the creation of the archdiocese and for its subsequent development.

## The Beginning of Orthodoxy in America

Orthodoxy in America began in 1794, when Russian missionaries from Valaam Monastery arrived at Kodiak Island in the Aleutian Islands.<sup>1</sup> The beginning of Orthodoxy in this country was found mainly in the future state of Alaska (which was a part of Russia) and in California, but very quickly grew up in the industrial areas of the United States such as Minnesota, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Connecticut, New York, and West Virginia. The entirety of North America and Canada was one large diocese with very scattered Orthodox communities.

The number of immigrant residents in the United States was rapidly increasing due to economic and social conditions abroad. The country of origin of the immigrants was very significant for the growth and development of Orthodoxy in America and in the founding of our archdiocese. Before 1880, most European immigrants were from the west and were largely Protestant. After 1880 however, 80% of new immigrants to the USA were from Eastern and Southern Europe.<sup>2</sup> Thus many of these new immigrants were Orthodox Christians, and the Russian Mission was overwhelmed by their numbers in a very short time.

The immigrants were in great need not only for housing and job opportunities, but also for the re-creation of the social life and community that they lost when they left their villages in the Old Country, and—perhaps more significantly—they were in need of a spiritual home. They were largely uneducated and untrained, were often limited to their native tongue and worked at manual labor in factories and mines. They needed priests who understood their specific ethnic backgrounds, challenges, and languages.

The Russian Mission made great efforts to respond to the expanding, varied, and scattered population of Orthodox Christians, including acquiring funds from Russia to support their priests and administrators,

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<sup>1</sup> Tarasar, Constance J. *Orthodox America 1794-1976: Development of the Orthodox Church in America*. Syosset, New York: The Orthodox Church in America, 1975, p. 15.

<sup>2</sup> Mayer, Maria and tr. János Boris. *The Rusyns of Hungary: Political and Social Development, 1860-1910*. East European Monographs, 1997. Copyright: The Carpatho-Rusyn Research Center, Inc., Ocala, FL, p. 191.

opening seminaries, schools, and orphanages, arranging for clergy from Eastern Europe, and assisting new arrivals at Ellis Island.<sup>3</sup>

## Early Parishes

The earliest parishes tended to be multi-ethnic in nature, because their numbers were small, and they joined together to build a church. These parishes were formed under the protection of the North American Diocese of the Russian Orthodox Church. As immigration from Orthodox regions increased, the immigrants began to congregate exclusively according to ethnicity. In fact, preserving their faith was often equated with preserving their native language and ethnic customs.

When Orthodox people arrived in Western Pennsylvania and surrounding regions, it was to work in the local factories, steel mills, and coal mines. They generally lived in the small town where their job was located. These towns sometimes developed around a particular factory, such as Pine Hill, Pennsylvania. It began when the Pine Hill Coal Company employees formed the town, and out of which the Pine Hill parish was founded. Sometimes the ethnic groups, societies, and schools were the foundation for Orthodox parishes. Other parishes were directly founded and served by priests such as Fr. John Nedzelnitsky, Fr. Constantine Popoff, Fr. Jason Kappanadze, Fr. Victor Toth, and many others.

The first Orthodox parish in Western Pennsylvania was St. Alexander Nevsky Church, formerly located on the North Side of Pittsburgh (at that time known as Allegheny City); it was founded in 1891 by Fr. Victor Toth, the brother of St. Alexander Toth, both of whom had converted to Orthodoxy. It was founded in 1891 as a truly pan-Orthodox parish including nearly a dozen ethnicities. Their services were held in Slavonic, Greek, Arabic, and Serbian.<sup>4</sup>

MAKEUP OF ST. ALEXANDER NEVSKY CHURCH, ca. 1895	
603 Serbs	4 Poles
476 Ugro-Rusins	2 Montenegrins
162 Galicians	1 American
150 Syro-Arabs	1 Moldavian
118 Russians	1 Negro
29 Greeks	

Two early parishes were originally formed as Greek Catholic parishes by Fr. Alexander Dzubay, a Greek Catholic priest.<sup>5</sup> He was a great leader among the Carpatho-Russians in America. Arriving from Europe in 1889, he was respected for his hard work and enthusiasm and helped to organize 15 parishes, including:<sup>6</sup>

- St. Nicholas Church in Duquesne, PA, founded in 1890 and received into Orthodoxy in 1917.
- Nativity of the Virgin Mary Church in Osceola Mills, PA, founded in 1890 and received into Orthodoxy in 1893.

## St. Patriarch Tikhon

In 1898, Bishop Tikhon of Russia was appointed Bishop of the Aleutians and Alaska, which was the beginning of his work in the North American Diocese. It is hard to overestimate the value of the work he did as he served the North American Diocese, and indeed today he is called the “Enlightener of North America.” He did much to promote the spread of Orthodoxy and to improve the vast diocese he served. He moved his see from San

<sup>3</sup> Michalopoulos, George C. and Ham, Herb. *The American Orthodox Church: A History of Its Beginnings*. Regina Orthodox Press, 2003, p. 44.

<sup>4</sup> Stokoe, Mark and Kishkovsky, Very Rev. Leonid. *Orthodox Christians in North America (1794 - 1994)*. Orthodox Christian Publication Center (OCPC), 1995, p. 22.

<sup>5</sup> Tarasar, p. 59.

<sup>6</sup> Jordan, John W. and Hadden, James. *Genealogical and Personal History of Fayette County Pennsylvania, Vol. 3*. New York Lewis Historical Publishing Company, 1912, p. 651, via Google Books.

Francisco to New York, established many parishes, was the primary founder of St. Tikhon's Monastery, and made very long journeys to all parts of his diocese, including annual visits to every parish in Western Pennsylvania.<sup>7</sup>

Bishop Tikhon held annual conventions of the Russian Orthodox Church, at least one of which was held in Pittsburgh, in 1899. It was hosted by Fr. John Nedzelnitsky of St. Alexander Nevsky parish and included 70 delegates. The topics discussed included the founding of an Orthodox newspaper to be printed in Russia as the official organ of the church in this country, the organizational structure of the diocese, including early mention of a local synod of bishops, and rules pertaining to the mutual aid society.<sup>8</sup>

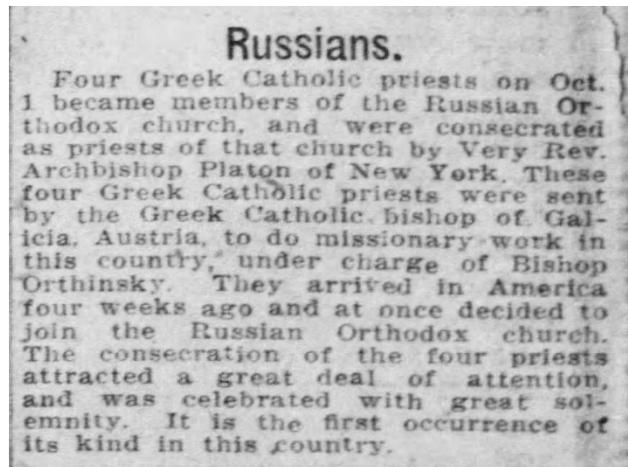
In 1907, Bishop Tikhon convened the First All-American Sobor in Mayfield, Pennsylvania. All-American Sobors—as they were known prior to 1970—and All-American Councils have continued throughout the life of the Church in America.

St. Tikhon was great proponent of education. One of the programs he directed, funded by the Church in Russia, educated promising young Russian boys from all over the country in Mission boarding schools followed by seminary, if desired. The aim was to further the established Russian Orthodox faith in this country and to raise up new priests from among its citizens. Two boys were sent from our diocese in 1904, Joseph Vaknovsky, son of a Russian mill laborer, from Archangel Michael Church and another from St. Alexander Nevsky Church.<sup>9</sup>

St. Tikhon foresaw the need for an independent local church in North America, and began to formulate a hierarchical structure by appointing vicar bishops: Bishop Raphael of Brooklyn for the Syrian Orthodox and Bishop Innocent (Pustynsky) of Alaska for the Aleuts and others. In 1907, he was raised to the rank of Archbishop and was reassigned to two Russian sees before being elected Metropolitan of Moscow. His tireless efforts, especially in appointing vicar bishops to assist in the North American Diocese, laid the groundwork for the establishment of a diocese in Pittsburgh.

## Bishop Stephen

Many of the Carpatho-Russian immigrants to Pennsylvania and other areas were Greek Catholics, and they had additional difficulties not seen among the Orthodox groups. Their Eastern traditions, including the legitimacy of their clergy, were either completely rejected by the Roman Catholic hierarchy in this country or were not permitted to be fully expressed. This extreme turmoil, which was as political as it was religious, led to the conversion of many Greek Catholics to the Orthodox faith. St. Alexis Toth was the first Greek Catholic priest to convert with his parish in Minnesota, and through his influence, 65 other Greek Catholic communities followed, totaling about 20,000 people by his death in 1909.<sup>10</sup>



<sup>7</sup> The Pittsburgh Daily Post, April 6, 1903, p. 9, col. 2, "Head of Greek Orthodox Church."

<sup>8</sup> The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, May 23, 1899, p. 4 col. 5, "Want a Paper."

<sup>9</sup> The Pittsburgh Daily Post, November 25, 1904, p. 3, col. 3, "Select Pittsburg Boy."

<sup>10</sup> Stokoe, Ch. 2: From "Greek Catholic" to "Russian Orthodox Greek Catholic."

In 1905, Fr. John Nedzelnitsky, an early pastor of St. Alexander Nevsky Church and the founder of Archangel Michael Church, compiled a membership estimate in the North American Diocese by ethnicity. At this time, nearly one-third of the members were of Carpatho-Russian origin, and this number was to dramatically increase.

After Archbishop Tikhon returned to Russia, Fr. Alexander Dzubay became disillusioned due to what he saw as the Latinization of the Carpatho-Russian churches in the United States<sup>11</sup> and converted to Orthodoxy.

In 1916, he was tonsured a monk with the name of Stephen and was consecrated as the first bishop of Pittsburgh. His title was “Vicar of the North American Diocese of Pittsburgh and the Carpatho-Russians.”<sup>12</sup> By this time, 98 additional Greek Catholic parishes numbering 100,000 people had returned to the Orthodox faith<sup>13</sup> across North America.

With such a great interest in Orthodoxy among Greek Catholics, the hope was that he would persuade even more to return to the Orthodox faith. However, he was not as successful as had been hoped, reportedly due to poor relationships with the Greek Catholic clergy he was trying to influence.

## Revolution and Transition

In the fall of 1917, the Bolshevik Revolution occurred in Russia, causing chaos in the North American Diocese only one year after the establishment of the Pittsburgh Vicariate. As a result, this strained the episcopal administration of the North American Diocese, caused financial stresses here, and tested the very unity of the fledgling Church in America. Communication between Russia and America

CURRENT AND FORMER PARISHES OF THE ARCHDIOCESE WITH YEAR FOUNDED	
<i>Duquesne and Osceola Mills</i>	1890
<i>Pittsburgh—Woods Run (St. Alexander Nevsky)</i>	1891
<i>Philipsburg</i>	1895
<i>Pittsburgh—Reed Street (Archangel Michael)</i>	1900
<i>Charleroi</i>	1901
<i>Vintondale-Wehrum, Monessen</i>	1902
<i>Patton</i>	1904
<i>Mingo Junction and Lyndora</i>	1906
<i>Ambridge</i>	1907
<i>Black Lick and Conemaugh</i>	1908
<i>Carnegie, Madera, New Castle, New Kensington</i>	1909
<i>Jeannette</i>	1910
<i>Masontown</i>	1911
<i>Export, Elkhorn, and Perryopolis</i>	1912
<i>Boswell and New Salem</i>	1913
<i>Homestead, McKees Rocks, Monessen (re-organized), Monongahela, and West Brownsville</i>	1914
<i>Forest Hills, Steubenville, Portage, and Wolf Run-Amsterdam</i>	1915
<i>Altoona, Bellaire, Colver, Donora, Ganister, Irvona, Moundsville, and Urey</i>	1916
<i>Aliquippa, Central City, Greensburg, McKeesport, and Pine Hill</i>	1917
<i>Arcadia, Butler, Canonsburg, Curtisville, Herminie, Jacob’s Creek, Pittsburgh—South Side, Woodlawn</i>	1918
<i>Weirton</i>	1919
<i>Edinboro-Crossingville</i>	1920
<i>Ellwood City</i>	1928
<i>Pittsburgh—South Side (re-organized)</i>	1943
<i>Erie</i>	1949
<i>Belle Vernon</i>	1966
<i>St. Alexander Nevsky (new building &amp; location)</i>	1972
<i>DuBois</i>	1978
<i>State College</i>	1980
<i>Beavertown</i>	2009

<sup>11</sup> Jubilee Editorial Committee. *150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Russian Orthodox Church of America (1794-1944)*, Vol. 1, p. 287.

<sup>12</sup> Woerl, Michael, ROCOR Studies, “Bishop Stephen (Dzubay)”, 2010.

<sup>13</sup> Stokoe, Ch. 2: From “Greek Catholic” to “Russian Orthodox Greek Catholic.”

was disrupted, and the hierarchs in Russia struggled with the deteriorating political landscape and the resulting social upheaval.

Within a short time St. Tikhon, now Patriarch of Russia, issued a decree that Russian Orthodox churches abroad should organize and govern themselves until matters in Russia could be resolved. Eventually this led to the creation of multiple overlapping Russian “Dioceses” in North America, the main two being the Russian Orthodox Greek Catholic Church in America, or Metropolia (to which the Pittsburgh Vicariate belonged and which was a continuation of the North American Diocese) and the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia (aka the Karlovtsy “Synod”).

The second impact of the Russian Revolution was financial. The Russian Orthodox Church had provided about a half million dollars a year to the North American diocese,<sup>14</sup> which is the equivalent of about \$10,000,000 today. This was only about half of what was needed, but even this amount was critical. The salaries and pensions of priests were paid entirely by the Russian Church, and most parishes could not afford to pay this plus the mortgage on their church property. Archbishop Alexander (Nemolovsky) began to mortgage church properties in response to the financial crisis, including Ss. Peter and Paul in South Side of Pittsburgh (the former name of Holy Assumption Church). This led to conflicts between hierarchy and parishioners, and in response, many trustee parishes were formed. Trustee parishes named a group of lay persons as holders of parish property instead of the bishop or the diocese.<sup>15</sup>

In our diocese, many Russian parishioners were concerned about their homeland due to the reports of poverty, widespread fighting, and a rapidly declining economy. Several parishes organized Russian relief work in support of those in the motherland.<sup>16</sup> The Pittsburgh diocese worked with the Pittsburgh Russian Famine Fund that raised \$57,000. Fr. Sergius Bazilevich, pastor of Archangel Michael Church and dean of the diocese, led the United Russian Choir during the fundraising meeting.<sup>17</sup>

The third problem was that any perceived unity among Orthodox in North America was disrupted. The hierarchical and financial problems caused various ethnic groups to turn to their respective homelands for pastoral care and oversight. For example, in 1918, Archbishop Meletios (Metaxakis) of Athens created a Greek Archdiocese of America under the Ecumenical Patriarchate. Although St. Tikhon had envisioned a Greek ethnic diocese under the North American Diocese, it was never achieved. In Pittsburgh, the first Orthodox parish of Greek ethnicity was St. Nicholas Greek Orthodox Cathedral. It began in 1906 and in 1923 joined the new Greek Archdiocese.



The Third All-American Sobor was held in Pittsburgh, whose diocese at that time was the largest in the church,<sup>18</sup> in 1922. This council named Metropolitan Platon (Rozhdestvensky), who had come to the United States as a

<sup>14</sup> Stokoe, p. 32.

<sup>15</sup> Tarasar, p. 180.

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.lawrencecountymemoirs.com/lcmpages/1004/holy-trinity-russian-orthodox-church-new-castle-pa>.

<sup>17</sup> Pittsburgh Press, January 16, 1922, p. 17, col. 4, “\$57,000 Contributed for Russian Relief.”

<sup>18</sup> Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, November 12, 1973, “Orthodox Church Opens Four-Day Session Here”, p. 34, col. 1.

refugee, as Metropolitan of All-America and Canada.<sup>19</sup> This decision was complex, and several questioned his appointment, including Bishop Stephen of Pittsburgh. Bishop Stephen returned to the Greek Catholic Church soon thereafter. He retired to a Catholic monastery in New York, where he reposed in 1933.<sup>20</sup> The Carpatho-Russian ethnic diocese of Pittsburgh was then dissolved, and Pittsburgh did not have another bishop for eight years.<sup>21</sup>

Archbishop Alexy (Panteleev) was from the Vologda Province in Russia and first served in our diocese as a priest, at Archangel Michael Church in 1912. After various other postings, including as the bishop of San Francisco and of Chicago, he was consecrated as the bishop of Pittsburgh in 1932. His tenure was brief, as he was assigned to Alaska in 1933.<sup>22</sup>

## The First Cathedral and Diocesan Center

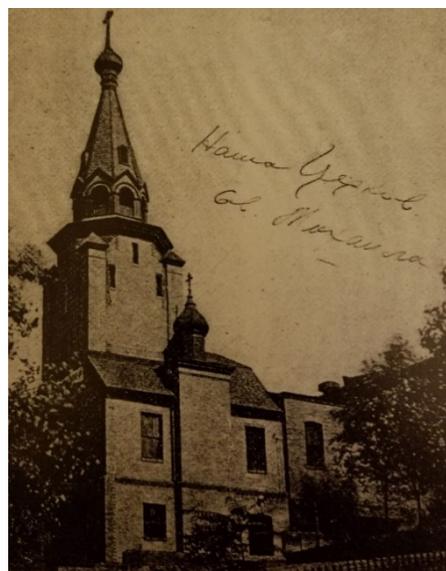
The Great Depression complicated the difficulties in the Metropolia. Many parishioners lost their jobs and their homes, and could not provide for their families. Some left the area to pursue other opportunities. Those who remained had very little money available to give to the church. Some of the churches, for example the parish in New Castle, lost their parish house property and had no place to house a steady priest or funds to pay him.<sup>23</sup>

Our third hierarch, Archbishop Benjamin (Basalyga), was assigned to the diocese at this time. He was the first Orthodox bishop to be born in America, in Olyphant, Pennsylvania. He was also one of the first students in the Russian school and later at the seminary in Minneapolis. When he arrived in Pittsburgh in 1933, there were three parishes within the city limits of Pittsburgh: St. Alexander Nevsky Church (Kerr/Ketchum Street in Woods Run, North Side), Archangel Michael Church (Reed/Vine Streets, Pittsburgh, in the Hill District), and Ss. Peter and Paul.

Archangel Michael Church had already been chosen to be the Pittsburgh Cathedral. However, this decision was attached to paying off any debt the church had accumulated. Their debt consisted of a large mortgage and accruing city taxes at a time when few could afford to support a parish.

To convert the church and house to a cathedral, these debts would need to be paid off or significantly reduced, and the house and church renovated. Bishop Benjamin appealed to Russian Orthodox clergy to support the establishment of the first cathedral. In fact, he equated the building up of the cathedral to the success of the vicariate.

Parishioners and clergy responded favorably, either with their own meagre finances, their labor, or through fundraising to pay down the debt. At the same time, Bishop Benjamin drew people who had fallen away back to the faith through increased services, church



*Archangel Michael Cathedral*

<sup>19</sup> Liberovsky, Alex, "The 3<sup>rd</sup> All-American Sobor", OCA History & Archives.

<sup>20</sup> Tarasar, p. 132.

<sup>21</sup> Wikipedia Contributors, "Stephen Dzuby", May 13, 2016.

<sup>22</sup> Russian Wikipedia, "Алексий (Пантелеев)", July 30, 2015.

<sup>23</sup> <http://www.lawrencecountymemoirs.com/lcmpages/1004/holy-trinity-russian-orthodox-church-new-castle-pa>.

school classes, choir practices, and camaraderie among the parishioners.<sup>24</sup> Bishop Benjamin served the Archdiocese from 1933-1946.

## World War II

The Orthodox people in our diocese supported the war effort in many ways. In 1942, bishops from seven jurisdictions—Greek, Russian, Carpatho-Russian, Ukrainian, Romanian, Syrian, and Serbian—held a convention to consider their responsibilities during wartime. They issued a proclamation to their flocks urging cooperation with the United States government in every possible way, including active service in the armed forces, buying war bonds, joining the Red Cross efforts, and most of all, by united prayer.

Locally, funds were raised by the Federated Russian Orthodox Clubs (FROC) through an annual spring dance to support the Federation Chaplains' Fund of the U.S. Army. Two priests from our diocese became Army Chaplains, including Fr. John Kivko of the Donora parish, who was stationed at Camp Patrick Henry in Virginia, and Fr. Michael Kovach of the Ambridge parish. This was the first time that Orthodox priests served as chaplains in the U.S. military.

Nationwide, the FROC raised over \$260,000 to buy two fighter planes, one called the "FROC Fighter" and one called the "The Spirit of the Federated Russian Orthodox Clubs." Both planes were active on the European front. The FROC also had 50,000 Orthodox prayer books published and distributed throughout U.S. Army camps all over the world.

## Post-World War II Era

In the aftermath of World War II, Archbishop Benjamin was recommended to lead the Orthodox Church of Japan by General Douglas MacArthur,<sup>25</sup> when the United States was "Christianizing" Japan. He became their Primate in 1946, where he worked to assist those who had been devastated by the destruction of war. Bishop Dionysius (Diachenko) was assigned to our diocese in 1947. He was a Russian priest from the Caucasus region. At the time of the Bolshevik Revolution, he left Russia via Siberia, serving in Shanghai for over 20 years. In the United States, he was Dean of St. Vladimir's Seminary and served the Diocese of Pittsburgh for three years.

For a brief time, there was no Bishop assigned to the Pittsburgh Diocese. In 1951, a "Cathedral Day" was celebrated by the 43 parishes of the diocese with a service at St. George's Grove near Bridgeville, Pennsylvania. At this event, the newly-elected Metropolitan Leonty (Turkevich), Metropolitan of All-America and Canada, led the Divine Liturgy, and Fr. Varlashkin, priest at St. Nicholas in McKees Rocks and Dean of the Pittsburgh Deanery, concelebrated with several other priests.<sup>26</sup> The service marked the opening of the Diocesan Cathedral Building Fund.<sup>27</sup>

Just a few months later, Archbishop Vyacheslav (Lisitsky) was assigned to our diocese. Archbishop Vyacheslav was from an area that is now in Ukraine and served as a regimental priest among the military for many years, ministering to Orthodox soldiers in the army and, at the end of World War II, to prisoners of war in German concentration camps. He served our Diocese for one year (1951-1952).

In 1953, the now Archbishop Benjamin returned as Archbishop of Pittsburgh. At this time, there were 52 parishes and 30,000 parishioners in the diocese.<sup>28</sup> For several years, parishioners had expressed their desire

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<sup>24</sup> Jubilee, Vol. 2, "Устроение Питтсбургской Кафедры Свято-Михайловский Соборъ", p. 239.

<sup>25</sup> Pittsburgh Press, May 18, 1963, p. 4, col. 2, "Russian Orthodox Archbishop Cherishes the Faith of his People."

<sup>26</sup> Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, August 4, 1951, p. 9, col. 1, "Greek Church Leader."

<sup>27</sup> Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, August 4, 1951, p. 5, col. 8, "Orthodox Churches to Meet Outdoors."

<sup>28</sup> Pittsburgh Press, May 18, 1963, p. 4, col. 2, "Russian Orthodox Archbishop Cherishes the Faith of his People."

to have a diocesan center in Pittsburgh<sup>29</sup> and raised money through the Cathedral Fund. The new Diocesan Center at 300 South Dallas Avenue in Point Breeze was purchased and renovated to serve as the bishop's residence and administrative offices. This building was the center of Archdiocesan activity until its sale in 1975 and the relocation of the Diocesan Center to Cranberry Township, Pennsylvania.



*Former Diocesan Center, as it appears in 2016*

During his second tenure, Archbishop Benjamin oversaw the creation of a Diocesan Council to assist him with administrative and educational functions. Diocesan Assemblies supported programs such as the pan-Orthodox Sunday of Orthodoxy services, the Lenten Mission Services, and the diocesan newsletter "Light of Orthodoxy." He also oversaw the formulation of a financial support system for the Diocese.

The second term of Archbishop Benjamin ended suddenly in 1963, when he reposed during the 11<sup>th</sup> All-American Sobor in New York. There was no Bishop assigned to the Pittsburgh Diocese for the next 4 years. Archpriest Peter M. Kreta of Dormition of the Blessed Virgin Mary Church in McKeesport, Pennsylvania served as administrator of the diocese. He developed the Archbishop Benjamin Scholarship Fund for seminary students in honor of the reposed Bishop.

## Social Aspects of Church Life

In the 1950s and 1960s, the churches in Western Pennsylvania, Ohio, and West Virginia were thriving. The Great Depression and World War II were over, and the economy in the USA was booming. One continuing challenge was the increasing need to transition from a diocese of immigrants into a diocese of Americans. The U.S. born Orthodox were attending American public schools and speaking English, while at the same time, they were worshipping in Church Slavonic in the Liturgy and were probably attending Russian school in the evenings and on weekends.

Russian<sup>30</sup> school was very important in many parishes. It provided their children with necessary language and historic education but also created social and cultural ties and even assisted in the founding of churches. For example, St. Nicholas in McKees Rocks began first as a Russian school in the early 1910s with 50 families participating. Many of them traveled to St. Alexander Nevsky across the river in the North Side to attend the Divine Liturgy. Then they organized a church in McKees Rocks in 1914 to avoid the arduous trek across the river by boat.<sup>31</sup>



*St. Nicholas, McKees Rocks, PA*

<sup>29</sup> Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, August 4, 1951, p. 9, col. 1, "Greek Church Leader."

<sup>30</sup> The term "Russian" is used loosely, and could have meant Russian or "Little" Russian, a.k.a. Carpatho-Russian.

<sup>31</sup> Tarasar, p. 160.

The lives of parishioners revolved mostly around their church community. They generally lived in the same area as their church, so the numerous social and liturgical activities were among the same people within a tight-knit community. There were many different local and national Orthodox organizations such as the Federated Russian Orthodox Clubs<sup>32</sup> (today known as the Fellowship of Orthodox Christians in America, or FOCA)—from which came local chapters of the “R” Club and the Junior “R” Club—as well as the various parish ladies’ altar guilds or sisterhoods, and men’s brotherhoods. Organizations such as the Russian Orthodox Catholic Women’s Mutual Aid Society and the Russian Brotherhood Organization sold

*The Federated Russian Orthodox Clubs was organized by Fr. Vladimir Prislopsky (at that time the choir director of St. Alexander Nevsky Church)<sup>27</sup> and many other clergy and laymen in 1927 with the goal of uniting Orthodox Christians in faith, fellowship, and service. They contribute in innumerable ways to youth ministry, religious education, liturgical music, missions (IOCC), scholarships, and financial assistance for seminaries. They also organize countless social, cultural and athletic activities. Through their United Fund, they raised and donated over \$2 million in financial assistance. In 1998, the organization was renamed the Fellowship of Orthodox Christians in America.*

insurance to their members and provided social and cultural ties. These societies were very influential in cultivating Orthodox fellowship and in developing Orthodox interests. For example, the FROC was instrumental in providing funds to both St. Vladimir’s and St. Tikhon’s Seminaries to begin operating.<sup>33</sup> They were so large and influential that in 1951, 1000 delegates attended their convention in Pittsburgh, and Metropolitan Leonty was the keynote speaker at the convention banquet.<sup>34</sup>

## Transition to English

As time passed and the next generation of American-born Orthodox Christians appeared, there was a need for English as the language of worship. While Church Slavonic was still often used in parishes, the increasingly English-speaking parishioners and children of parishioners desired to pray in a language they could fully comprehend. This would involve a translation of all service books, prayer books, and music into English, which was a monumental task.

The first book published in English in our diocese was by Archbishop Benjamin in 1933. He was the head of the Educational Department of the Alumni Association of the North American Theological Seminary. This department published the Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom, including a short catechism and daily prayers in both Slavonic and English.<sup>35</sup>

In 1941, Fr. Andrew Glagolev was ordained a priest and assigned to Archangel Michael Cathedral in Pittsburgh.<sup>36</sup> He advocated the use of English in church services and published a pioneering book of the Divine Liturgy music in English in 1948. Other well-known musicians, the Soroka family (Fr. Igor, Fr. Leonid, Fr. Vladimir, and his son Leonard), has been publishing music in English since the late 1950s for the Divine Liturgy, the marriage service, the *Panikhida*, Vespers, Matins, and the liturgical year.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> FROC (<http://www.orthodoxfellowship.org/history.html>).

<sup>33</sup> Tarasar, p. 203.

<sup>34</sup> Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, September 2, 1958, p. 1, col. 2, “Orthodox Russians End Convention.”

<sup>35</sup> Tarasar, p. 202.

<sup>36</sup> *OrthodoxWiki.org/Sergei\_Glagolev*.

<sup>37</sup> Tarasar, p. 241.

In 1967, the Metropolia issued an official English translation of the Divine Liturgy which became the standard text in the OCA.<sup>38</sup> Today, due to the work of these visionary pioneers, the majority of our parishes celebrate the Divine Services entirely in English. However, parishes continue to use pastoral discretion to conduct portions of a service in Church Slavonic, especially to accommodate recent immigrants from Russia and other Eastern European countries.

## Music and the Festival of Orthodoxy

In our diocese, we have been blessed with very talented singers and choir directors over our 100-year history. Most parishes had a dedicated choir or cantor for liturgical services and took great pride in their abilities. Many sang not only during the liturgical services but also in public forums. For example, Ethnic Christmas Festivals in Carnegie Music Hall were popular for Orthodox Choir participation from the 1930s through the 1980s.

In 1949, Fr. Igor Soroka organized the Russian Male Chorus.<sup>39</sup> In the first year, they numbered 70 men and sang at various choir concerts and liturgical services in the area, singing folk as well as contemporary songs.

The Council of Eastern Orthodox Youth Leaders of America (CEOYLA) was a pan-Orthodox lay movement that brought together multiple Orthodox youth organizations including Russian, Greek, Carpatho-Russian, Bulgarian, Ukrainian, Romanian, Syrian, and Serbian. This pan-Orthodox group was active from 1953 through the 1980s with over 53,000 members in over 800 chapters.<sup>40</sup> CEOYLA influenced the creation of the Orthodox Christian Fellowship (OCF) on college campuses.

In 1963, the first Orthodox religious-cultural festival, called the Festival of Orthodoxy, was held in Pittsburgh. Its aim was to celebrate the unity and diversity of Orthodoxy. This came to be a very famous event within Orthodoxy in Pittsburgh, which many believe has never been surpassed. Its success demonstrates the vibrancy of Orthodoxy in that era. The program included a Vespers service at the Civic Arena and a reception at the Penn-Sheraton Hotel afterwards.

The Vespers service was led by 100 acolytes and 150 priests and was sung in several languages, including English, Greek, Slavonic, Arabic, and Romanian. Archbishop Benjamin of the Metropolia and Bishop Theodosios (Sideris) of the Greek Archdiocese, Pittsburgh District, were honorary chairmen.

Seven Orthodox choirs were present from various jurisdictions, each with a maximum 150 singers. One of these, the Russian Choir, was directed by Fr. Igor Soroka of the Donora parish. The combined festival choir was called the “Thousand Voice Choir,” and was directed by Fr. Vladimir Soroka. Many Orthodox Christians in our area who attended this event remember it quite vividly to this day.

The most significant aspect of the 1963 gathering was that over 12,000 people attended, led by twelve Orthodox hierarchs from nearly every jurisdiction. It was the largest mass gathering in the history of Orthodoxy in America. It was also broadcast on national TV and on Voice of America radio. In 1977, the Festival was repeated, with Fr. Igor Soroka directing the combined choir during a Vespers service with Bishop Theodosios (Lazor) as the chief celebrant.<sup>41</sup>

The Russian choir organized for the 1963 CEOYLA Festival prompted the creation of the Cathedral Choir, which was organized and directed by Fr. Igor Soroka of Donora. They performed for many celebrations,

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<sup>38</sup> Stokoe, Ch. 8 “Debates Over Language.”

<sup>39</sup> Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, August 21, 1949, p. 6, col. 6 “40-Voice Male Choir Organized.”

<sup>40</sup> Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, August 2, 1963, p. 8, col. 2 “Orthodox Groups Plan Festival Here.”

<sup>41</sup> Ancient Faith Radio, “The Cathedral Choir of Pittsburgh Celebrates 50 Years!”, Fr. Thomas Soroka, interview of Fr. Igor Soroka, September 23, 2013.

liturgical services, and festivals throughout its history. They raised money for the Cathedral building fund, produced six recordings of their music, and sang for the 12<sup>th</sup> All-American Council, which was held in Pittsburgh in 1999. Fr. Igor also organized national choir conferences at the FROC Ohio Camp, which were very influential on the next generation of singers and choir directors. Fr. Igor retired from leading the choir in 2014.

## Calendar Revision

In the worldwide Orthodox Church, many observe the church year according to the Julian calendar, including the Russian Orthodox Church, from whom we descend. Other national churches began to transition to the Revised Julian or “new” Calendar as early as 1923. At the 13<sup>th</sup> All-American Sobor in 1967, the decision was made to permit parishes in the Metropolia to use the Revised Julian calendar upon approval of their diocesan bishop.<sup>42</sup> Most parishes in our diocese transitioned from the old to the new calendar in the ensuing years, and in fact it was announced in 1982 that the official calendar of the Orthodox Church in America (formerly the Metropolia) would be the Revised Julian calendar beginning September 1.

Some did not welcome the change. The following year, in 1983, there were several parishes in the diocese who continued to follow the Julian calendar: McKeesport, Monessen, Masontown, Curtisville, Irwin, Monongahela, and New Salem.<sup>43</sup> A few parishioners in new calendar parishes who disagreed with the calendar change left to join an old calendar parish. A result of the disagreement was that the McKeesport parish left the diocese and was received into the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia.

## Autocephaly

The Metropolia had desired to normalize relations with the Russian Orthodox Church overseas for decades. On April 10, 1970, after intense negotiations, the Russian Orthodox Church granted autocephaly to its daughter church in America, which became known as the Orthodox Church in America (OCA). Our future Metropolitan Theodosius (Lazor) traveled to Russia for the honor of receiving the Tomos.

Archbishop Amvrossy (Merezhko) was the Archbishop of Pittsburgh and West Virginia, beginning in 1967. One of his main accomplishments was to improve financial stability in the diocese by instituting Diocesan Assessments. However, Archbishop Amvrossy became increasingly dissatisfied with some of the perceived changes in church practices within the OCA, including, as he put it, the use of English in liturgical services, the absence of a strict liturgical life, the use of the new calendar, and changes in the relationship between confession and communion. He decided to leave the OCA and was received into the ROCOR in 1972.<sup>44</sup>

## Metropolitan Theodosius

The former Vicariates of the Russian Mission were the first to develop into Dioceses, including the Diocese of Pittsburgh. One of the most significant developments in the diocese at this time was in the election of bishops. The Diocese of Pittsburgh was the first to nominate its ruling bishop in 1972, with its election of Bishop Theodosius (Lazor). Prior to that time, episcopal appointments were made by the Metropolitan and Council of Bishops.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Liberovsky, Alex, “The 13<sup>th</sup> All-American Sobor”, OCA History & Archives.

<sup>43</sup> Pittsburgh Press, January 6, 1983, p. 13, col. 1, “Russian Orthodox Churches Split Here.”

<sup>44</sup> “Declaration of His Eminence Amvrossy, formerly of Pittsburgh and West Virginia”, *The True Vine, Volume 1.1*, (May, 1972), via [rocorstudies.org](http://rocorstudies.org).

<sup>45</sup> Cooke, Nicholas A. *A History of the Diocese of the West of the Orthodox Church in America*, Walnut Creek, CA, 1990, p. 71.

Metropolitan Theodosius was born in Canonsburg, Pennsylvania, the second hierarch in our diocese to be born in America. He was educated at St. Vladimir's Seminary and was tonsured a monk one year later, in 1961. In 1970, he became the Auxiliary to the Metropolitan of All America and Canada. Two years later, he was appointed to the Diocese of Pittsburgh and Western Pennsylvania.

During his tenure, he instituted and developed many new programs to foster religious education. One of the first things he did was to create the Department of Religious Education, whose first administrator was Fr. Paul Ziatyk. Programs created through this department included a six-week lecture series every spring and fall; this series remained an important educational staple for 30 years. There was an archdiocesan religious retreat held every year during Great Lent with nationally-recognized guest speakers, including Fr. Alexander Schmemmann, Fr. John Meyendorff, and Dr. Veselin Kesich. They also sponsored regular church school teacher retreats and in 1975 graduated the first class from the late vocations program for deacons.<sup>46</sup>

In 1973, the Third All-American Council of the OCA was held in Pittsburgh. Over 500 bishops, clergy, and laity were expected to attend from the United States, Canada, and Mexico. Metropolitan Ireney (Bekish), Primate of the Church, and 14 members of the Holy Synod of Bishops attended. Peter Flaherty, Mayor of Pittsburgh, proclaimed November 11-17 as Orthodox Church Week in the city and welcomed the delegates. Bishop Theodosius was the honorary chairman, while Fr. Igor Soroka of Donora and John Rusinko of McMurray were the local functioning committee co-chairmen. The council agenda included the administration and statutes of the national church, clergy-laity relations, finances, and missions.<sup>47</sup>

In 1975, the decision was made to purchase a new diocesan property in Cranberry Township to serve as the bishop's residence and administrative office. The new property is located several miles north of the city of Pittsburgh and was chosen for the large size of the property, the potential use of the land for diocesan activities, and its close location to two major highways. In 1977, Bishop Theodosius was elected as primate of the Orthodox Church in America, becoming Metropolitan of all America and Canada.

## **Archbishop Kyrill**

Archbishop Kyrill (Yonchev) was born in Panaguriste, Bulgaria, and eventually named abbot of the famed Bachkovo Monastery. During World War II, he and other civic and religious leaders helped protect Bulgaria's Jewish population from extermination at the hands of the Nazi occupiers.

In the post-World War II era, the formation of communist governments in Eastern Europe, and their animosity toward Christianity, led to a break in the ties between the churches in these countries and their daughter parishes in the USA.<sup>48</sup> Due to Communist oppression, he immigrated to the United States in 1950 and became pastor of a parish in Toledo, Ohio. In 1964, he brought a group of Bulgarian churches into the ROCOR and was consecrated as their Bishop. In 1976, he and the parishes under his leadership (the Bulgarian Church in Exile) were received into the OCA.

Two years later, Bishop Kyrill was named as the Archbishop of Pittsburgh and Western Pennsylvania, which he led for the next 29 years. At his death, he was the longest serving Orthodox hierarch in America.

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<sup>46</sup> Pittsburgh Press, June 14, 1975, "Orthodox Deacon Class to Graduate", p. 4, col. 2.

<sup>47</sup> The Daily Notes, Canonsburg, PA, November 12, 1973, p. 1, col. 2 "Orthodox Church council attended by area leaders."

<sup>48</sup> Krindatch, Alexei D., "The Orthodox Churches in the USA at the Beginning of a New Millennium", Patriarch Athenagoras Orthodox Institute, Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, CA.

During his tenure, Archbishop Kyrill directed the erection of a shrine to the Mother of God of Vladimir in 1979, designated St. Alexander Nevsky parish, which had relocated to Allison Park in 1972, as the Archdiocesan Cathedral, in 1981, and oversaw the construction of the pavilion at the archdiocesan property in 1986.

In 1988, the diocese held a millennial celebration in honor of the Baptism of Rus—the conversion of the peoples of Russia to Christianity. The activities included an Archdiocesan Assembly, workshops, slide presentations, youth activities, liturgical services, and a festive banquet.<sup>49</sup>

In 1999, the 12<sup>th</sup> All-American Council of the Orthodox Church in America was held in Pittsburgh. More than 2,000 clergy and laypersons attended the council. Fr. Paul Suda and Fr. Paul Ziatyk were local co-chairpersons for this council, whose focus was on unity among the various Orthodox jurisdictions in the United States. The estimates at that time were that 50 percent of Orthodox Christians in the United States were of the Greek Archdiocese, and 25 percent belonged to the OCA.<sup>50</sup>

## Challenges

Beginning in 1970, there was a severe economic downturn in our area caused by foreign industrial competition and the closing of mines, steel mills, and factories where many immigrant families had been employed for generations. Those towns that grew up around one particular industry were decimated when that industry failed. With the massive job loss, many people moved out of the area. Dozens of formerly thriving towns had sharply declining populations with little opportunity for economic growth.

Unfortunately, many parishes in those towns of our diocese were affected. Although there have been only a few closures (including Aliquippa, Erie, New Castle, Bellaire [Ohio], Forest Hills, and Pittsburgh–Reed Street), some parishes also struggled with declining membership due to the economic downturn and suburban flight. Other social issues such as intermarriage with non-Orthodox Christians also contributed to a declining diocesan population.

The 15<sup>th</sup> All-American Council, held in Pittsburgh in 2008, attempted to turn the page on a period of unrest in the OCA due to financial and administrative issues that caused considerable turmoil. Metropolitan Herman (Swaiko), a native of the Pittsburgh area, had retired from the Primacy two months earlier, and the newly-consecrated Bishop Jonah of Fort Worth was elected as the Metropolitan of All America and Canada.

## Renewal

On April 2, 2009, Archimandrite Melchisedek (Pleska) was elected Bishop of Pittsburgh and Western Pennsylvania by the Holy Synod of Bishops of the Orthodox Church in America after his nomination by an archdiocesan assembly. A native of Dayton, Ohio and of Slavic roots, he was educated at St. Vladimir's Seminary and eventually became an Instructor of Dogmatic Theology at St. Tikhon's Seminary in South Canaan, Pennsylvania. Six years after entering a monastic brotherhood in Greece, he was tonsured to the Great Schema in 2004 and blessed to serve as a Spiritual Father. With the blessing of his metropolitan and with help from four other priest-monks, he reopened the Nativity of the Theotokos Monastery in Petrilo, Greece. There he served as chaplain before returning to the United States upon his episcopal election.

As hierarch, Archbishop Melchisedek instituted a Catechetical Program open to both men and women who wish to learn about their faith on a much deeper level. This three-year program, led by Fr. Paul Ziatyk, and co-taught by several clergy members, teaches scripture, history, patristic writings, and doctrine.

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<sup>49</sup> Allegheny Times, October 27, 1988, p. B6, col. 1, "Orthodox Churches Celebrate Millennium."

<sup>50</sup> Indiana Gazette, July 29, 1999, p. 9, col. 1, "Orthodox Christians Meet in Pittsburgh."

To those who lived through the local economic downturn of past decades, and its effect on many of our parishes, the decline may seem troubling. But there have been increasingly hopeful signs of renewal and growth. In 2011 the archdiocese enlisted Joseph Kormos of Ohio to lead a Parish Development Ministry. The purpose of this ministry is to educate parishes on how they can honestly assess their situations and make positive changes toward health and revitalization. Numerous helpful articles, newsletters, webinars and the annual Small Parish Forum have given parish clergy and lay leaders new ideas and hope for the future.

Today many parishes are welcoming an increasing number of young families with children into the diocese. The number of new converts to the faith continues to grow. Youth groups, men's groups, and young-mothers' groups are forming in various places. Parishes are hosting informative talks by national leaders and well-known teachers. The Orthodox Christian Fellowships in local universities are very active. Bible studies, vacation church schools, and more weekday and Lenten services are now commonplace in an increasing number of parishes. Social media has become a key component for many parishes to introduce Orthodox Christianity to the public. Some parishes have active outreach ministries to engage the local community. Many parishes have sponsored charitable endeavors which directly aid local families, such as the St. Cyril of White Lake Food Pantry in the South Side. Others participate in local and national Orthodox ministries, or have developed ministries to other groups in need. All of these are signs of new life and vitality.

*It is our obligation to share our spiritual treasures, our truth, our light, and our joy with those who do not have these gifts. And this duty lies not only on pastors and missionaries, but also on lay people..."*

— St. Patriarch Tikhon, Farewell Sermon,  
March 17, 1907

As we gather to celebrate the centennial of our archdiocese, we are grateful to God for planting the Orthodox Faith by His Right Hand in the Greater Pittsburgh area over 100 years ago. We pray that God would grant eternal rest to the souls of all of those clergy and lay persons who labored to establish parish churches in our various communities, gathered into one diocese, and to our former bishops who were our fathers in Christ. We ask that God would continue to establish us in the Orthodox Faith, to enter the future with faith, hope, and love, and to build up the body of Christ in our parishes and our archdiocese to His Glory.

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### IN RECOGNITION OF OUR ARCHDIOCESAN CHANCELLORS

*Our archdiocese has been blessed with outstanding chancellors. They have selflessly shared their gifts and talents in maintaining the orderly operation of the diocese. As the bishop's primary representative, they dedicate countless hours developing diocesan programs and working with parish clergy and laity. We thank them for their guidance, diligence, and leadership!*

**Mitred Archpriest Peter Kreta (+1970)**

**Archpriest Michael Draovitch (+1996)**

**Archpriest John Waschak (+1996)**

**Archpriest Paul Ziatyk (retired)**

**Archpriest William Evansky (current)**