

## Taking Parish Photos

Tips & Tricks from a Professional Photographer

By Matushka Ksenia Bruner

Before ever snapping the shutter, I think every person with a camera needs to ask themselves one question: “What is my goal with these photographs?” In my photography business, I am hired to tell a story. Generally, I am hired to tell the story of a wedding, but I also tell stories of ordinations, baptisms, liturgies, hierarchical visits, and any other event where the memories will be captured on disc. The end goal of great photographs is to tell the story of the event that is being captured.

So many people think that great photographs can only be taken with high-end equipment, years of education and expensive software. The truth is, anyone can take a great photograph, with a few hints, and lots of practice! So, what makes a photograph great? I think the answer is subject, composition and lighting. These three elements working together will help to tell the story that you are trying to capture.

### Tip #1: Composition & the Rule of Thirds

The primary difference between a “snapshot” and a “photograph” is composition. Generally, in a “snapshot”, the primary subject in the photos is right in the center of the photograph. Although this does highlight the subject, the interest level in the photo is diminished. Instead of placing the primary subject in the center of the photograph, consider using the “Rule of Thirds”.

The Rule of Thirds works like this: Imaginary lines are drawn dividing the image into thirds both horizontally and vertically. You place important elements of your composition where these lines intersect.



*Notice that the most interesting points in the photos (i.e. the wedding rings on the left and the deacon and book at the right) intersect as the points and follow the Rule of Thirds.*



Before

After

*In the photos above, notice how the first photo just isn't that interesting with the main subject of the photo (the choir director) in the middle. With just some simple cropping, I was able to utilize the Rule of Thirds and place the important elements in this photo (the director and, more interestingly, his directing hand) into an intersecting point.*

## **Tip #2: Know the Services**

Taking great photographs is more than just knowing how to compose a photo or understanding exposure and aperture. It's really about being in the right place at the right time in order to capture the event. Understanding the services will not only get you the best angle, but your story telling will be that much more complete when you understand all that is happening. You will be much more prepared to capture the small details and nuances of the services. If there is a service coming up that you are not particularly familiar with, don't be afraid to ask your parish priest to run through the service with you so that you know what is coming up.



*I knew the "route" of the Great Entrance at this parish, and was able to prepare myself for the deacons and priest coming back towards the altar. In addition, I knew that when two deacons concelebrate the Divine Liturgy, one carries the censer while the other carries the Diskos and the priest walks behind them. Because I knew the order, I waited for just the right moment when I was able to capture the main subject (the Diskos) with all of the clergy visible in the photo.*

*In an event such as an ordination, which does not regularly occur in most parishes, it is all that much more important to know the service. For example, taking a photo with the ordinand in the center of the church with the aer over his head must be done quickly, as he is only there for a few short minutes. Knowing that he will be there allows you the time to get into a position to get the best angle for the photo.*



### **Tip #3: Use Natural Light**

Lighting is as important as subject and composition when it comes to photography, but I would challenge photographers to not be so quick to use flash. Nearly every situation has a variety of natural lighting that is simply far more beautiful than any light that a flash can produce. The light that God has created for us always has a more natural beauty than the harshness of flash lighting.

In general, direct flash lighting (as often seen from a point and shoot camera) tends to be very flat lighting and almost always produces a very harsh back shadow. Take for instance the following photograph:



*This photograph would be a wonderful and strong photograph if it were not for the back shadow that was created because of direct flash.*

There are times when using flash is not only appropriate, but also necessary, but in these instances, I would recommend using an external flash, and learning how to “bounce” the flash so as to create a beautiful and directional light.

However, generally, the most beautiful light that we have access to is simply the very light that was created by God: natural light. Natural light is soft, directional and abundantly available! In churches, we can often take advantage of natural light from windows and open doors.



*Although the face of His Eminence, Archbishop DMITRI is not illuminated in this photo, and I could have illuminated it if I used flash, I chose to allow the natural light streaming in from the window to create a beautiful and dramatic lighting on his vestments.*

Another opportunity for more natural lighting and also abundantly available in Orthodox churches is candle light. Candles create a beautiful and warm light that add a sense of mystery and drama to photos.



*Using just candlelight to illuminate the main subject creates a sense of mystery and drama in this photo. It also keeps with the mood of the event: Reading at the Tomb of Christ at Nocturns prior to Pascha.*

#### **Tip #4: Interesting Angles Make for Interesting Photos**

One of the greatest things that separate snapshots from photographs is the angles at which photographs are taken. Without a doubt, interesting angles make for interesting photos. Straight shots are great for setting the scene and telling the overall story of the event, but just as details make the story (more on that later) so do interesting angles. Tell the story with items in the foreground or background, while keeping the focus on the primary subject.

When choosing your angle to take a photo, make sure to remember to change your vertical plane. Try to get above the action from a balcony, or get your camera down on the floor and shoot looking up. When shooting children, get down to their level so as not to always photograph them from above. It's ok to block the primary subject with an interesting foreground element to help set the scene (as seen in the center photo).



*The scene here is very clearly at a wedding, but just as the focus of any marriage should be on Christ, so is this photograph.*



*The deacon holding the Gospel is a common scene at every service, and the angle here shows not just a deacon, but also a hierarch during Great Lent.*



*A deacon swinging a censer is also a common event at every service, but this angle shows the action of the primary subject and gives the viewer the feel of being in the scene.*

#### **Tip #5: Show People Being Active in the Parish (i.e. Children are Always Photogenic)**

When choosing subjects that will be highlighted on the parish website, remember to take photos of people doing all the things that they do: the reader, reading; the choir, singing; the priest, serving and distributing communion; the altar boys, serving, etc. Visitors to the parish website want to see ways in which they can be involved. Show them all of the possibilities in the parish and how Liturgy really is the work of the people.

In addition to showing ways in which adults can be involved, it is often very important for young families to know that their children will be welcome in church. Children are naturally

photogenic, but often when they see a camera, they tend to stop their natural activity and “smile” for the camera. To avoid the “cheese” look and get natural photos, use a long zoom and stand back in order their natural activity. Show photos of children involved in a variety of ways, both inside the church, and also during social events. Keep in mind when posting photos of children on a website to always have parental consent, and never post names of the children, for safety purposes.



*Visitors to your parish website want to see an active sacramental life. Make sure to show photos of regular services, in addition to special events.*



*People coming for a visit will want to see ways they can be involved. Show members of the choir singing, or altar boys serving, or other ways in which people of the church can minister.*



*A father helps his young son at the parish Easter Egg Hunt.*



*A mother holds her baby during the Divine Liturgy.*



*A young girl sits blissfully unaware of the camera pointed in her direction.*

### **Tip #6: It's All in the Details**

Details are extremely important in story telling. Start reading any book, and you will quickly see the great details that the author outlines to help bring the story together and to make the story flow. The same is true for telling a story through photography. Details help to set the setting of

the story, they help the story to flow, and they add interest to an otherwise ordinary service. Details count!



*The crowns lie atop the Gospel at the start of a wedding ceremony. In the background you can see the covered common cup and the scene is truly set with the icon of the Wedding of Cana in the background.*



*The Bishop's staff becomes the primary subject of this photo. This seemingly strange subject shows off the small details of this Hierarchical visit. The small glimpse of purple vestments helps to set the scene as being a Hierarchical visit during Great Lent.*



*The music sung on Pascha is illuminated with just a single candle. The subject of this photo is not the person singing the music, but rather, the music itself. It is clear from this photograph where and when this service is taking place.*

### **Final Tip:**

As you become more comfortable with your camera, don't hesitate to experiment a little and think "outside the box". Sometimes your experiments will flop, but sometimes, you'll get a true gem of a photo. As you improve, start to read about setting your camera manually and don't be afraid to learn about shutter speeds, apertures and other technical information. Those advanced elements will make your photos stronger in time.

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