Quo Vadis

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"Quo Vadis?" is a Latin phrase meaning "Where are you going?" It refers to a Christian tradition regarding St. Peter. According to the apocryphal *Acts of Peter*, Peter is fleeing from likely crucifixion in Rome, and along the road outside the city, he encounters the risen Jesus. Peter asks Jesus "Quo vadis?" Jesus replies "Romam vado iterum crucifigi" ("I am going to Rome to be crucified again"). St. Peter thereby gains the fortitude to return to the city, to eventually be martyred by being crucified upside-down. The phrase also occurs a few times in the Latin *Vulgate* translation of the *Holy Bible*, notably in John 13:36 when Peter asks Jesus the same question, to which He responds, "Whither I go, thou canst not follow me now, but thou shalt follow me." The Church of Domine Quo Vadis in Rome is built where, according to tradition, the meeting between St. Peter and the risen Jesus Christ took place.

This parish newsletter is called ***Quo Vadis*** for a reason: to ask the question of where *you* are going in life. Is your life's journey leading you towards Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ? St. Peter, at a pivotal moment in his life, when he understandably felt like running away, found the courage to go where Jesus Christ would have him go. Where are *you* going? Will *you* follow Jesus Christ?

Rector's Message

Last month's issue of *Quo Vadis* featured a map showing the 50 most dangerous countries for being a Christian. This issue's Rector's Message is a commentary on the 10 worst of these countries.

#10. Iran
The Acts of the Apostles tells us that there were Persians, Parthians, and Medes among the first new Christian converts at Pentecost (Acts 2:9). Since then, there has been a continuous presence of Christians in Iran. Most of Iran's Christians are Armenians and Assyrians.[1] In 1976, the census reported that the Christian population of Iran holding citizenship there numbered 168,593 people, with most of them being Armenians. Due to the Iran–Iraq War in the 1980s and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in the 1990s, almost half of the Armenians migrated to the newly independent Armenia, but one estimate from 1999 placed the number as high as 310,000. Other estimates since 2000 have placed the number of Christians with Iranian citizenship as high as 109,415 in 2006. Significant immigration of Assyrians from Iraq has been recorded during this period, due to massacres and harassment in post-Saddam Iraq. However, most of those Assyrians in Iran do not have Iranian citizenship, and therefore are not included in the data. On February 2, 2018, four United Nations human rights experts said that members of the Christian minority in Iran, particularly those who have converted from Islam to Christianity, are facing severe discrimination and religious persecution in Iran. Muslims who change their faith to Christianity are subject to societal and official pressure which may lead to the death penalty. Although the Civil Code does not provide explicitly for the death penalty – with the crime being punishable by fines,

[1] There is even a Russian Orthodox community in Iran. A Russian spiritual mission was operating in Iran by the beginning of the 20th century and, by 1917, there were about 50 Russian Orthodox churches. Over the next three years, however, everything that had been created over the previous three centuries was lost. In the early 1940s, a Russian church, St. Nicholas Cathedral, reappeared in Iran thanks to the donations of Russian emigrants, which was under the administration of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia. In the early 1990s the church was gradually abandoned and in 1995, at the request of its parishioners, St. Nicholas Cathedral was accepted into the Moscow Patriarchate.

lashing, and prison terms – judges can impose the death penalty if they desire. Nevertheless, according to Shay Khatiri of the Yorktown Institute, "Islam is the fastest shrinking religion in Iran, while Christianity is growing the fastest," and in 2018 "up to half a million Iranians are Christian converts from Muslim families. In 2023, the country was given a score of zero out of four for religious freedom.

#9. Libya

Christianity has existed in Libya since Roman times. Today, the largest Christian group in Libya is the Coptic Orthodox Church, was has historical roots in Libya predating the Arab conquest in the seventh century. The next largest denomination is Roman Catholicism. There are Greek Orthodox churches in Tripoli and Benghazi, and an Anglican church in Tripoli (ministering mainly to African migrants). However, there are restrictions for Christian religious activity. It is prohibited to proselytize Muslims; thus, a non-Muslim man must convert to Islam if he wants to marry a Muslim woman. Religious literature is restricted. In February 2014, east of Benghazi, seven Coptic Christians were dragged out of their houses in the middle of the night and shot dead execution-style by Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). On January 12, 2015, twenty-one Coptic Christians were abducted by forces of ISIL On February 15, 2015, these Christians were executed by ISIL shown in a video titled "A Message Signed with Blood to the Nation of the Cross." In 2023, Pope Francis announced that the men would be commemorated by the Catholic Church and listed within the Roman Martyrology. On April 19, 2015, ISIL released another video in which they executed about 30 Ethiopian Christians. In 2023, six Protestant Christian converts were sentenced to death for proselytizing. In 2023, Libya was ranked as the third most dangerous country in the world to be a Christian.

#8. Pakistan

Christianity is the third-largest religion in Pakistan, with the 2023 Census recording over three million Christians, or 1.37% of Pakistan's total population. A substantial majority of Pakistani Christians are Shudra-caste Dalits who converted from either Hinduism or Sikhism. The province of Punjab has the largest population of Christians in the country. The majority of Pakistan's Christians are members of the Catholic Church or the Church of Pakistan, with the remainder belonging to other Protestant groups. Around 75% of Pakistan's Christians are rural Punjabi Christians, with the remainder being the upper and middle class Goan Christians and Anglo-Indians. After the partition of British India and the formation of Pakistan in 1947, many Sikhs were forced to migrate to an independent India. Many Christians worked under Sikh landlords and when they departed from West Punjab, the Government of Pakistan appropriated Sikh property to Muslims arriving from East Punjab. This caused over 300,000 Christians in Pakistan to become homeless. Christians faced judgment living in Pakistan, with local Muslims even stating that they had to live a life of servitude and perform sanitation work. Some Christians were therefore murdered for refusing to pick up garbage. Many churches built during the colonial Indian period, prior to the partition, remain locked, with the Pakistani government refusing to hand them over to the Christian community. Others have been victims of church arsons or demolitions. With the governments of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and Zia ul-Haq, more stringently Islamic laws transformed Pakistan. Conversion to faiths other than Islam is not prohibited by law. However, the blasphemy laws make it treacherous for non-Muslims to express themselves without being accused of being un-Islamic. Zia also introduced Shariah as a basis for lawmaking, reinforced by Nawaz Sharif in 1991. Coerced conversions to Islam from Christianity are a major source of concern for Pakistani Christians, and the minority faces threats, harassment and intimidation tactics from extremists. The Christian community in Pakistan encounters significant challenges, discrimination, and persecution solely on the grounds of its religious identity. The law enforcement and justice system, as well as the presence of "blasphemy" laws and bonded labor, are often exploited to target, trap, and imprison religious minorities, with a particular focus on Christians.

#7. Nigeria

Christianity in Nigeria represents one of several religious traditions in the country, including Islam and Traditional African religions. Christianity arrived to Nigeria in the 15th century through Augustinian and Capuchin friars from Portugal. By 2020, it accounted for an estimated 45% of the Nigerian population, two-thirds of which are Protestant. As such, it remains the second-largest religion in Nigeria, behind a 50% Muslim majority. According to the Pew Research Center, in 2011, Nigeria had the largest Christian population of any country in Africa, with more than 80 million people in Nigeria belonging to various denominations. Christianity is the majority religion in the southern and central regions of Nigeria. According to the International Society

for Civil Liberties and Rule of Law, there were 52,250 Christian deaths recorded from July 2009 to April 2023. The Catholic *Crisis Magazine* has claimed that Christians are routinely denied land to build churches, that Christian students are denied Christian religious curricula in the primary and secondary levels, and instead are forced to study Islam and that they're denied jobs and promotions in state-owned enterprises as well as the right to seek public office. According to The World Watch List for 2024, 3,100 Christians were killed and 2,830 Christians were kidnapped in Nigeria. In May 2025 a series of attacks carried out by Fulani herders killed 36 Christians. The Boko Haram insurgency aims to establish an Islamic state in Nigeria, which has resulted in the persecution of Nigerian Christians. The number of Nigerian Christians killed for their identification as Christians accounts for 70% of those being killed for their faith worldwide. In 2023, Global Christian Relief reported that 52,250 Christians were murdered for their faith in the previous fourteen years. In 2025, this garnered international attention with United States president Donald Trump vowing military action in Nigeria if the attacks against Christians did not subside; on Christmas Day 2025, the United States targeted ISIL cells in Nigeria.

#6. Syria

Christianity in Syria is among the oldest Christian communities on Earth, dating back to the first century, and has been described as a "cradle of Christianity." With its roots in the traditions of St. Peter and St. Paul the Apostle, Syria quickly became a major center of early Christianity and produced many significant theologians and church leaders. Their legacy includes some of the most ancient churches, monasteries, and pilgrimage sites in the world. Its capital, Damascus, is the seat of the Patriarchate of Antioch. Before the Syrian Civil War, Syria would not have been on this list. However, in recent times, the Syrian Christian community has faced numerous challenges, including ongoing and severe persecution, displacement, and emigration. Christians in Syria made up about 10% of the pre-war Syrian population but now they comprise 1.6% of Syria's population due to the impact of the Syrian Civil War. Christians have also been subjected to violence and discrimination by Islamic State fighters during their control of large areas of the country. Their churches have been converted into military headquarters, and their property confiscated. Persecution of Christians in Syria has further intensified since. In Aleppo, the country's second largest city and previously a major center of Christianity in the Middle East, the proportion of Christian residents fell from 12% pre-war to 1.4% in 2023 with more than 20 churches damaged during the war. The city of Idlib has been almost entirely depopulated of its Christian population under Islamist rule. Some governments and organizations including the United States, have claimed that the persecution of Christians in the Middle East and North Africa, especially in Syria and Iraq, constitute an act of genocide. The country's largest Christian denomination is the Greek Orthodox Church of Antioch, closely followed by the Syriac Orthodox Church and the Armenian Apostolic Church. There is a small minority of Protestants in the country.

#5. Eritrea

Eritrea has two dominant faiths: Christianity and Islam, with various estimates placing Christianity as the religion of around 63% of the population of Eritrea. Eritrean Christians are primarily followers of Oriental Orthodoxy, with a much smaller segment consisting of members of the Catholic Church, and less than 1% of the population following Evangelicalism. Historically, the Kingdom of Axum, which overlapped with what is now Eritrea, was the first African Christian country in the world, having officially adopted Christianity as the state religion in the fourth century, and Christianity is the oldest world religion practiced in the country. One of oldest monasteries in the country, Debre Sina, dates back to the 4th century—it is one of the oldest monasteries in Africa and the world. Christians in Eritrea belong to three main groups: the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church, the Catholic Church (mostly the Eastern-rite Eritrean Catholic Church), and the Evangelical Church (unrecognized by government). So how is it that Eritrea ranks as the fifth worst place to be a Christian in 2026? The reason is that the country is governed by a Marxist-Leninist dictatorship that is its only legal party, even though the unimplemented 1997 Constitution provides for the existence of multi-party politics. President Isaias Afwerki has been in office since independence in 1993 and stated, in a 2008 *Al Jazeera* interview, that "Eritrea will wait three or four decades, maybe more, before it holds elections. Who knows?" In 2023, the country was scored 1 out of 4 for religious freedom—this was actually seen as an improvement, as several religious prisoners had been released in the previous months.

#4. Sudan

Christianity in Sudan has a long and rich history, dating back the first century. Ancient Nubia was reached by Coptic Christianity in the late first century. The Coptic Church was later influenced by Greek Christianity, particularly during the Byzantine era. From the seventh century, the Christian Nubian kingdoms were threatened by the Islamic expansion, but the southernmost of these kingdoms, Alodia, survived until 1504. Since independence in 1956, Sudan's Christians have been persecuted under various military regimes. Sudan's civil wars resulted in the displacement and death of millions of Christians before a temporary six-year ceasefire was signed in January 2005. In May 1983, Sudan's Anglican and Roman Catholic clergy signed a declaration that they would not abandon God, as God had revealed himself to them under threat of Shariah Law. Anti-Christian persecutions grew particularly after 1985, including murders of pastors and church leaders, destruction of Christian villages, as well as churches, hospitals, schools and mission bases, and bombing of Sunday church services. Lands laid waste and where all buildings were demolished included an area the size of Alaska. Despite the persecutions, Sudanese Christians increased in number from 1.6 million in 1980 to 11 million in 2010. This was despite 22 of the 24 Anglican dioceses operating in exile in Kenya and Uganda, and clergy being unpaid. Four million people remain internally displaced, and another million are in the Sudanese diaspora abroad (of which 400,000-600,000 are of the South Sudanese diaspora). In 2011, South Sudan voted to secede from the north, effective July 9th. Persecution of Christians there had resumed by then. The Naivasha Agreement technically protects non-Muslims in the north. Some interpretations of Muslim law in Sudan refuse to recognize conversions out of Islam, considering apostacy a crime, and refuse to recognize marriages to non-Muslims. In 2014, there was controversy over the planned execution of Maryam Yaḥyā Ibrahīm Isḥaq for apostasy. She was later released and after further delays left Sudan. In 2025, Sudan was ranked as the fifth most dangerous country to be a Christian.

#3. Yemen

Christianity was a widespread religion on the territory of Yemen as early as the 5th century, before arrival of Islam. The most prominent site of Christianity in Yemen became the oasis of Najran. Najran had a bishop in this time, and many pieces of Christian architecture were constructed, such as the Kaaba of Najran. Today, Christians as a group make up 0.06% of the country's population. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church is the largest denomination in Yemen, according to the *World Christian Encyclopedia*. A 2015 study estimated that there were 400 Christians from a Muslim background in the country. Pew-Templeton estimated the number of Christians in Yemen at 40,000 in 2013. In 2020, there were 400 Catholics in the country, which included one priest and eight nuns. There are also approximately 2,500 Catholics who are temporary foreign workers or refugees. In Aden, there are one Catholic church and two Anglican churches. In Sana'a, Yemen's capital, there are weekly Protestant services, with 436 Protestants. Christian missions from several countries are active in Yemen. There are hospitals that belong to foreign Christian institutions. However, in 2020, Yemen was ranked as 'High' on the scale of state discrimination against minority religions and it is reported that Christians and other religious minorities are often discriminated against when attempting to access humanitarian aid. Conversion from Islam to Christianity is not legally recognized by the state. Yemen was third on Open Doors' 2023 World Watch List, an annual ranking of the 50 countries where Christians face the most extreme persecution. In the same year, it was scored 1 out of 4 for religious freedom.

#2. Somalia

Christianity is a small minority religion in Somalia, which has a population mostly Sunni Muslim, and Islam as the state religion. Estimates range on the number of Christians residing in the nation, with the US Department of State reporting there to be approximately 1,000 Christians in 2020. Some of the modern-day Christian adherents come from the Bantu ethnic minority group or are descended from Italian colonists. There is one Catholic diocese for the entire country, the Diocese of Mogadishu. Other Christian groups include the Church of the Nazarene and a Swedish Evangelical Mission. Due to the ongoing civil war in the southern part of the country, professing Christians in Somalia have faced persecution and sometimes death. Apart from Mogadishu Cathedral (which is no longer used for Christian services), there are no church buildings in the country. Nor is there any legal protection for Christians, some of whom meet in underground churches. Paramilitary groups in Somalia have also engaged in widespread looting of Christian graves, in addition to the desecration of Sufi Muslim graves and mosques. Sometimes the term "Christian" was a label that the jihadists would affix on people they suspected of working for Ethiopian intelligence. In August 2009, International Christian Concern

reported that four Christians working to help orphans in Somalia were beheaded by Islamist extremists when they refused to convert to Islam. In December 2013, the Ministry of Justice and Religious Affairs released a directive prohibiting the celebration of Christian festivities in the country. In 2023, the country was scored zero out of 4 for religious freedom.

#1. North Korea
Today, Christianity's presence is only marginal in North Korea, but is significant in South Korea, which has a population of 8.6 million Protestants, mostly Presbyterians, and 5.8 million Catholics. This reflects the profound change in the Korean sociocultural and political landscape since the division of the peninsula at the 51st parallel following Japan's surrender on September 2, 1945. Christianity in the form of Catholicism was first introduced during the late Joseon Dynasty period by Confucian scholars who encountered it in China, but was officially outlawed in 1787, culminating in the Catholic Persecution of 1866, in which 8,000 Catholics across the country were killed, including nine French missionary priests. However, later in the 19th century, the opening of Korea to the outside world gradually brought more religious toleration toward Christians. Most of the gradual growth until 1945 was in the country's North. Pyongyang, North Korea's capital city, was once known as the "Jerusalem of the East" because of the city's numerous Christian churches, with 1/6 of the city's population then being Christian. Prior to the Korean War (1950–1953), two-thirds of Korean Christians lived in the North, but later fled to the South—how many are in the North today is unknown. Since then, Christianity has grown exponentially in the South, where today 31% of the population is Christian. North Korea's state policy of atheism, as a major facet of its official ideology, makes the practice of religion virtually impossible.[2]

Lives of the Saints

St. Phocas the Gardener – commemorated on September 22

Holy tradition states that Phocas was a gardener who lived at Sinope, on the Black Sea, whose only possessions were a garden which he cultivated with great diligence. His income from the garden was very small. But since he was a good steward and frugal in his needs, he would always have something for the poor. Saint Phocas studied the Holy Scriptures with pleasure. He even told those who saw him studying that our soul is also a garden, which requires care, so that it does not produce thorns and thistles.[1] The gardener Phocas also desired that everyone's souls should become spiritual gardens. So, wherever he could, he contributed to their purification and cultivation. While he was selling vegetables and fruits, he spoke words of great spiritual profit at the same time. Not only did he benefit Christians, but he also converted many pagans. At that time, the idolaters were persecuting Christians. Therefore, when it became known that the gardener Phocas was a Christian, the rulers sent soldiers to arrest him.

Since the Saint's home was near the castle gate which communicated with the port, he often had many visitors; sometimes foreign travelers, and sometimes the poor. So, when the soldiers came, he welcomed them as guests. After some time had passed, he asked them the purpose of their visit. Obliged by his hospitality they disclosed their secret, that they were seeking the Christian Phocas in order to behead him. They even told him that he would be doing them a great favor if he would help them. Unperturbed, St. Phocas came out of his house to dig and prepare his own grave, and the next day he told the soldiers who he was. They were astonished and ashamed, because they had been received by St. Phocas with so much love that they did not want to kill him. The saint understood their difficulty and told them not to hesitate, but to carry out their orders since it was not they who would be responsible for his murder, but rather those who sent them. By speaking in this way, he persuaded the soldiers to behead him. An accurate account of St. Phocas' death is mentioned St. Asterius of Amasea (+410).

Christians built a magnificent church on the site of his beheading, and they placed the honorable relics of the Holy Martyr in it. This became a source of comfort for the afflicted, and healing for the sick. A fragment of the Holy Relics of St. Phocas is located in the Monastery of Proussos in Evrytania (a region in central Greece).

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[2] Interestingly, there is a Korean Orthodox church, the Church of the Life-Giving Trinity, in Pyongyang, North Korea, built in 2006 with Russian assistance. There are about 6,000 Eastern Orthodox in South Korea in 2026.

When his homeland, Sinope, was in danger of famine, wheat was found, thanks to the saint's protection. St. Phocas worked many miracles of healing. He appeared to some people in their sleep, but he was not visible to others. Thus, the insignificant and humble gardener Phocas is honored by Christians because of his gift of working miracles.

The Holy Martyr Phocas is especially venerated by sailors, and he is also invoked by those who travel by sea. The name Phocas seems to derive from the Greek word for "seal" (*phoke*/φώκη), which may explain his patronage of sailors and mariners. He appeared several times to sailors who were in danger of sinking in the sea, and saved them from drowning. At other times he would awaken the helmsman, telling him to be ready, for a storm was coming. Other times he was seen by the sailors in rough seas helping sometimes on the ropes, sometimes on the sails, or sometimes protecting the ship, so that it would not be wrecked on a reef, or be caught in heavy rain. Here is how the custom of having St. Phocas as a guest at their table was begun among sailors. When they were sitting at the table, one of the sailors bought the saint's share; the next day another sailor bought it, and so they collected the money. When the ship reached its destination, they distributed the money to the poor.

St. Phocas the Gardener is commemorated in the Eastern Orthodox Church in September 22, and in the Roman Catholic Church on July 3. He is the patron saint of gardeners, market-gardeners, hospitality, agricultural workers, farmers, fieldhands, husbandmen, sailors and mariners.

Theological Excerpt

The Feast of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, celebrated on September 8th, holds a profound place in the heart of the Church. While the birth of Mary is not described in detail in Sacred Scripture, its significance has been revered since the earliest days of the Church. Tradition and the writings of the Church Fathers, saints, and popes offer a rich tapestry of reflections on this singular moment in salvation history.

Mary's nativity marks the dawn of the fulfillment of God's redemptive plan, for she is the one chosen to bear the Savior. This meditation will explore the scriptural and theological significance of the Blessed Virgin's birth, drawing from the insights of the Church Fathers and the saints, as well as stories of miracles associated with this feast.

Although the Bible does not directly recount the birth of the Blessed Virgin Mary, it sets the stage for understanding her role in salvation history. The most significant prophecies that foreshadow Mary's birth and mission are found in the Old Testament. The book of Genesis offers the first glimpse of her in what is known as the Protoevangelium: “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel” (Genesis 3:15). This passage not only foretells the coming of Christ but also the special role of His mother, the “woman” who will play a part in crushing the serpent. The Church has long seen Mary as this woman, and her birth is the dawn of that victory over sin.

The Gospel of Matthew connects Christ's genealogy with significant women, including the Virgin Mary, showing that her life was intimately connected with God's providential plan (Matthew 1:1-16). St. Paul also indirectly highlights the importance of Mary's role in his letter to the Galatians:
“But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship” (Galatians 4:4-5).

Although Mary’s nativity is not recorded in these texts, the foundations for her importance are embedded within the arc of salvation history, as the chosen vessel to bring forth the Redeemer.

The Protoevangelium of James, an early Christian text, offers the earliest detailed account of Mary’s birth. Though not considered canonical, this work profoundly shaped the Church's understanding of Mary's early life. According to this account, Mary's parents, Saints Joachim and Anne, were devout Jews who remained childless for many years. Their prayers and fasting were answered by the angelic announcement that they would bear a daughter. This moment is seen as the beginning of a divine sequence of events leading to the Incarnation.

The story of Joachim and Anne resonates with other miraculous births in the Old Testament, such as the births of Isaac, Samuel, and Samson. In each case, God intervened to bring forth a child who would play a pivotal role in the unfolding of His divine plan. The birth of Mary mirrors these, but it is even more profound, as she would become the Mother of God.

The Church Fathers were instrumental in shaping the theological understanding of Mary's nativity. St. Augustine of Hippo emphasized the unique holiness of Mary's birth, for she was conceived to be the immaculate vessel for Christ. Though St. Augustine primarily focused on her immaculate conception in his works,[3] the implicit holiness of the Virgin Mary from her very birth was essential in his theological framework: "Mary was chosen in a unique way, and her birth heralded the coming of the Savior . . . She was conceived in purity, so that the all-holy Son of God could take His flesh from her." (Augustine, De Natura et Gratia).

St. John of Damascus, a great defender of Marian theology, celebrated the feast of Mary's birth with great joy. In his homilies, he underscored that her birth brought hope to all humanity: "Today, the bridge between heaven and earth is built. God prepares the way for the Incarnation, for the birth of the Queen of Heaven signifies the approach of salvation for mankind." (John of Damascus, Homily on the Nativity of the Theotokos).

For St. Andrew of Crete, the birth of Mary was nothing short of a cosmic event, a "prelude to the joy of the universe" and a moment where the darkness of sin begins to recede in the light of her arrival: "Let the whole creation sing praise and dance and unite to celebrate the joy of this day... For the birth of the Theotokos is the prelude to the grace and truth that is Christ." (Andrew of Crete, Sermon on the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin).

The saints throughout history have celebrated the Nativity of the Virgin Mary with great devotion. St. Bernard of Clairvaux, renowned for his devotion to Our Lady, spoke about her birth as a time of joy not just for her parents, but for the entire world: "The Virgin's birth is a new light for the world, a new dawn rising to banish the shadows of sin. For from her was born the Sun of Justice, Christ our God." (Bernard of Clairvaux, Homily on the Nativity of the Virgin Mary).

In a similar vein, St. Alphonsus Liguori, known for his profound Marian writings, encouraged devotion to the feast of Mary's Nativity, seeing it as a chance for all Christians to renew their hope in Christ through Mary's intercession: "The birth of Mary announces to the world the coming of its Savior, and thus the festival

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[3] St. Augustine of Hippo did not teach the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception as it is understood today. While he spoke of Mary's sinlessness, his writings do not affirm that she was conceived free from original sin. In *On Nature and Grace* (c. 42), St. Augustine says: "We must except the holy Virgin Mary, concerning whom I wish to raise no question when it touches the subject of sins, out of honor to the Lord… for from Him we know what abundance of grace for overcoming sin in every particular was conferred upon her who had the merit to conceive and bear Him who undoubtedly had no sin." St, Augustine is emphasizing Mary's actual sinlessness in life — that she was preserved from personal sin by grace — in this passage, not that she was conceived without original sin. His point is to honor the Lord by avoiding any discussion of Mary's sins, because she was given the grace to overcome sin in every particular.

The doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, as defined by Pope Pius IX in 1854, teaches that Mary was preserved from all stain of original sin from the first instant of her conception, in view of the merits of Christ. This is a much stronger claim than St. Augustine's teaching. Why St. Augustine's view is different:

- St. Augustine's teaching aligns with the medieval understanding of Mary's sinlessness in life, but not with the doctrine of her conception.
- His own doctrine that original sin is transmitted to all humans through ordinary generation became a key objection to the Immaculate Conception in the Middle Ages.

Later theologians like Duns Scotus and Franciscans developed ways to reconcile Mary's sinlessness with the need for Christ's redemption, but Augustine himself did not address the conception issue. In summary, St. Augustine affirmed Mary's sinlessness, but he did not teach that she was conceived immaculate. The full doctrine of the Immaculate Conception as it is today developed centuries later, building on earlier Marian piety, but not directly on St. Augustine's writings.

of the Nativity of Mary is a time for us to reflect on the infinite love of God for humanity in giving us such a perfect and loving Mother." (Alphonsus Liguori, The Glories of Mary).

Several popes have offered profound reflections on the significance of Mary's birth. Pope Pius X, in his encyclical *Ad Diem Illum Laetissimum*, highlights the intimate connection between Mary's birth and Christ's mission of redemption: "The holy nativity of the Virgin Mother, born without stain, marked the beginning of the final chapter of the divine plan, for it was through her that the Redeemer entered the world" (Pius X, Ad Diem Illum Laetissimum, 1904).

Pope John Paul II spoke about the importance of Mary's nativity in his Marian catecheses, emphasizing that her birth was "a sign of hope for the world" because it signaled the approach of Christ, the one who would conquer sin and death: "Mary, in her birth, brings the first rays of the dawn of salvation to a world that awaited its Redeemer with hope. Her birth gives light to all humanity, for it prepares the way for the coming of Christ" (General Audience, September 8, 1998).

The Feast of the Nativity of Mary has long been associated with numerous miracles. In the medieval period, there are accounts of miraculous healings and interventions on this feast day, especially when the faithful invoked Mary's intercession.

One such account is the miracle of Chartres in 911, during which the city of Chartres, France, was under attack by Viking forces. The bishop of Chartres led a procession with a relic of the Virgin Mary's veil on September 8th, and after fervent prayers, a sudden storm arose, dispersing the enemy forces and saving the city. This miracle has been attributed to the intercession of the Virgin Mary, invoked particularly on her birthday.

Similarly, in Italy, the Basilica of Our Lady of the Nativity in Loreto was built to honor the Virgin Mary and became a site of numerous miraculous cures over the centuries, especially on her feast day. Pilgrims would travel to the basilica to celebrate her birth, and many reported being healed of various ailments after praying before the statue of Our Lady.

The Nativity of Mary reminds the faithful of the central role that the Mother of God plays in the mystery of salvation. Her birth signifies that God's long-awaited plan for the redemption of humanity is now unfolding. For Christians, this feast is an opportunity to reflect on Mary's unique vocation and her constant maternal care for the Church.

Mary's birth is also a moment of deep personal reflection. Just as her birth was a moment of joy for Joachim and Anne, so too are we invited to experience the joy of being children of God. The Church invites us to recognize in Mary's birth the promise of new beginnings, of grace, and of a fresh relationship with Christ.

The Feast of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary is not merely a historical commemoration but a living celebration of the hope, love, and grace that Mary brings to the Church. Her birth is a prelude to the Incarnation, the moment when the Mother of God first enters the world, predestined to cooperate in the redemption of mankind.

As we celebrate this feast, may we, like the Church Fathers, saints, and popes who came before us, draw closer to Mary, seeking her maternal intercession and striving to emulate her purity, humility, and perfect obedience to God's will. Through her birth, the dawn of salvation breaks forth, and with her, we too can rejoice in the coming of the Light of the World, Jesus Christ, Our Lord and Savior.
Excerpt from "Mystical Theology" by Rev. Scott A. Hayes

Frequently Asked Questions

"Why does the Orthodox Liturgy mention Mary so much? Why do you pray to Mary?"

As the one who gave birth to God Himself in the flesh, we hold her in high reverence and respect. It only makes sense that we should love someone who literally held God inside her for nine months. She also

shows us the way to become one with her divine Son—humility, love and obedience to Him. Why is she so important? Mary stands witness that Jesus Christ is fully human, even while being fully God. The early Christians made a point of inserting into the Nicene Creed (AD 325) the statement that Christ was "incarnate … of the Virgin Mary" to ensure there was no confusion on this matter. As for prayers, we pray with Mary, and ask her to intercede on our behalf, as we do with all our Saints. It's no different than asking your own mother to pray for you. And in this case, we're asking Jesus' mother to pray for us.

Recipe of the Month

Chicken Fricot

Chicken Fricot is an Acadian chicken stew with dumplings, which was one of the staples of the Acadian diet in the Canadian Maritimes. You take one chicken, stretch it as far as it will go, add onions, carrots, and potatoes from the garden, and season it simply with summer savory. This is the food of Sunday dinners, church suppers, and big family tables. It is such an important part of Acadian food culture that the call to eat in Acadian French is "Au fricot!" I present to you my grandmother's recipe.

INGREDIENTS

- 5-7 lb. chicken
- 14-16 cups cold water
- 2 bay leaves
- 2 large onions
- 6-8 medium potatoes
- 4-5 carrots
- 1-2 teaspoons summer savory
- Salt and black pepper

Dumplings:

- 2 cups flour
- 1 tablespoon baking powder
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 2 tablespoons fat (butter or oil)
- 1 cup milk

DIRECTIONS

1. Peel and cut potatoes into chunks, peel and slice carrots thickly, and halve one onion.
2. Place chicken, halved onion, bay leaves, and 1 tablespoon salt in your stock pot.
3. Cover with cold water, bring to a boil, then reduce to a simmer.
4. Skim foam.
5. Simmer gently 1½ hours, until meat falls easily from the bone.
6. Lift chicken out onto a tray and let cool enough to handle.
7. Shred meat into bite-sized pieces, set aside.
8. Return bones and carcass to the pot for another 30 minutes while you prepare the vegetables.
9. Remove the carcass.
10. Chop second onion and add chopped onion, potatoes, and carrots to the pot.
11. Simmer 20-25 minutes until tending, adding summer savory halfway through.
12. Return chicken meat to the pot, stir through, and season well with salt and pepper.
13. Mix flour, baking powder, and salt in a bowl.
14. Cut in fat until mixture resembles coarse crumbs.
15. Stir in milk until just combined.
16. Drop by spoonfuls onto the simmering broth, cover, and cook 10-12 minutes (don't peek). *The dumplings are essential to the recipe—by absorbing liquid, they ensure that you end up with a chicken stew rather than a soup!*

Daily Bible Readings

9/1	1 Timothy 2:1-7	Luke 4:16-22	(New Year)
9/1	Colossians 3:12-16	Matthew 11:27-30	(St. Simeon)
9/1	Ephesians 4:17-25	Mark 12:1-12	
9/2	1 Corinthians 14:20-25	Matthew 25:1-13	
9/3	2 Corinthians 6:16-7:1	Matthew 15:21-28	
9/4	Ephesians 4:25-32	Luke 3:19-22	
9/5	Ephesians 5:20-26	Luke 3:23-4:1	
9/6	Ephesians 5:25-33	Luke 4:1-15	
9/7	Galatians 6:11-18	John 3:13-17	(Sunday Before)
9/7	Ephesians 5:33-6:9	Luke 4:16-22	
9/8	Ephesians 6:18-24	Luke 4:22-30	
9/8	Philippians 2:5-11	Luke 10:38-42; 11:27-28	(Theotokos)
9/9	1 Corinthians 15:39-45	Luke 4:31-36	
9/10	2 Corinthians 9:6-11	Luke 5:1-11	
9/11	Philippians 1:1-7	Luke 4:37-44	
9/12	Philippians 2:5-11	Luke 10:38-42; 11:27-28	(Theotokos)
9/12	Philippians 1:8-14	Luke 5:12-16	
9/13	Hebrews 3:1-4	Matthew 16:13-18	(Church)
9/13	1 Corinthians 2:6-9	Matthew 10:37-11:1	(Saturday Before)
9/13	Philippians 1:12-20	Luke 5:33-39	
9/14	Philippians 1:20-27	Luke 6:12-19	
9/14	1 Corinthians 1:18-24	John 19:6-11, 13-20, 25-28, 30-35	
9/15	Philippians 1:27-2:4	Luke 6:17-23	
9/16	1 Corinthians 15:58-16:3	Luke 5:17-26	
9/17	2 Corinthians 11:31-12:9	Luke 6:31-36	
9/18	Philippians 2:12-16	Luke 6:24-30	
9/19	Philippians 2:17-23	Luke 6:37-45	
9/20	1 Corinthians 1:26-29	John 8:21-30	(Saturday After)
9/20	Philippians 2:24-30	Luke 6:46-7:1	
9/21	Galatians 2:16-20	Mark 8:34-9:1	(Sunday After)
9/21	Philippians 3:1-8	Luke 7:17-30	
9/22	Philippians 3:8-19	Luke 3:19-22	
9/23	Galatians 4:22-31	Luke 1:5-25	(Forerunner)
9/23	2 Corinthians 1:8-11	Luke 3:23-4:1	
9/24	Romans 8:28-39	Luke 21:12-19	(New Martyrs)
9/24	Galatians 1:11-19	Luke 4:1-15	
9/25	Galatians 5:22-6:2	Luke 6:17-23	(Saint)
9/25	Philippians 4:10-23	Luke 4:16-22	
9/26	1 John 4:12-19	John 19:25-27; 21:24-25	(St. John)
9/26	Colossians 1:1-2, 7-11	Luke 4:22-30	
9/27	Colossians 1:18-23	Luke 4:31-36	
9/28	2 Corinthians 4:6-15	Luke 6:17-23	(Saint)
9/28	Colossians 1:24-29	Luke 5:1-11	
9/29	Colossians 2:1-7	Luke 4:37-44	
9/30	2 Corinthians 3:12-18	Luke 5:12-16	

Parish News

Parish Council Meeting

The Parish Council's next meeting is Wednesday, September 16, 2026 at 6:00 PM.

Upcoming Diocesan Events

(1) There will be special collection on two consecutive Sundays, September 13 and 20, for the benefit of this year's diocesan charity, "Operation Buffalo." Thank you in advance for your generosity!
(2) September 18-20 (Friday-Sunday): Senior Retreat at St. Andrew's Camp. Jewell, NY—featuring Dr. David Ford of St. Tikhon's Seminary as guest speaker. Registration fee (all-inclusive): $150. See flyer posted on bulletin board in the church vestibule.

(3) The Parish Council Conference in the NJ Deanery is being held on Saturday, September 26, 2026 at Ss. Peter & Paul Cathedral, 109 Grand St., Jersey City, NJ. You do not have to be a parish council member to attend. Please let Stephen Wasilewski know if you plan to attend. See flyer posted on bulletin board in the church vestibule.
(4) The Mountain Men's Retreat in the New York State's Adirondacks is scheduled for September 25-27, 2026 (Friday-Sunday).
(5) The Fall Teen Retreat at the YMCA in Claryville, NY is scheduled for October 2-4, 2026. The NJ Deanery is looking into chartering a bus to/from this event. More details to follow as they become available.
(6) Our parish's pasta & meatball dinner is taking place on Sunday, October 25, 2026 at 12 PM. Tickets for adults are $35 (half price for children up to age 12). This is a BYOB event, with a tricky tray and food/beverage gift basket raffle. See flyer posted on bulletin board in the church vestibule.

Schedule of Services

September 5-6, 2026

5:00 PM (Saturday) – Great Vespers
9:30 AM (Sunday) – Divine Liturgy

September 7-8, 2026 [*Nativity of Virgin Mary*]

6:00 PM (Monday) – Great Vespers w. Lity
9:30 AM (Tuesday) – Divine Liturgy

September 12-13, 2026

5:00 PM (Saturday) – Great Vespers
9:30 AM (Sunday) – Divine Liturgy

September 13-14, 2026 [*Elevation of Holy Cross*]

5:00 PM (Sunday) – Great Vespers w. Lity
9:30 AM (Monday) – Divine Liturgy

September 19-20, 2026

5:00 PM (Saturday) – Great Vespers
9:30 AM (Sunday) – Divine Liturgy

September 26-27, 2026

5:00 PM (Saturday) – Great Vespers
9:30 AM (Sunday) – Divine Liturgy

Special Donations

Special Donations may be offered at $15 for the Altar Vigils, $10 for the Sanctuary Lamp, and $5 for any one of the following: St. John's Cross, St. Nicholas' Cross, and Triple Candelabra, and may be offered in memory of the departed or in honor of the living. For acknowledgement of Special Donations in the October 2026 issue, the donation must be recorded in the Special Donations register in the church vestibule by September 20, 2026.

September 6, 2026

Sanctuary Lamp offered for the health and salvation of Helen Wanko on her birthday by her children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. Many Years! Многая літа!

September 13, 2026

Altar Vigils offered by Helen Wanko in memory of Andrew Wanko (anniversary of repose). **Sanctuary Lamp** offered by Fr. W. Sophrony Royer in memory of Wilfred J. Royer (12th anniversary of repose). **St. John's Cross** offered by Fr. W. Sophrony Royer in memory of Donald G. Royer. **St. Nicholas Cross** offered by Fr. W. Sophrony Royer in memory of Anastasia Sahonchik.

September 20, 2026

Altar Vigils offered by Helen Wanko in memory of Mary Grudinoff (anniversary of birth).

September 27, 2026

Triple Candelabra offered by Fr. W. Sophrony Royer in memory of Omer J. Royer. **Altar Vigils** offered by Helen Wanko in memory of Mary Grudinoff (anniversary of repose).

Remember to support the parish every time you shop!

ShopRite, Stop & Shop, and Acme gifts cards available for purchase in the church vestibule.