



ST OLYMPIA ORTHODOX CHURCH

NORWOOD, NEW YORK 13668



ORTHODOX CHURCH IN AMERICA
DIOCESE OF NY AND NJ



St Olympia's Patronal Feast with Archbishop Michael

Monday, July 24, 2023

Vespers, 6pm

Tuesday, July 25, 2023

Vesting the Bishop, 9:30am, Divine Liturgy, 10am

Most Holy Saint Olympia, counselor to patriarchs, deaconess and friend of Saint John Chrysostom, you are like a tower, a haven, and a wall of defense, as you speak to all in the eloquent voice of your example. You are rich in the fruits of courage, patience, and serenity, with the force of virtue as your rudder. You are a patron of the poor and a defender of the faith. Through the power of your philosophic soul, intercede with Christ our God, to save our souls.

Troparion

You escaped from the storm of human woes, O noble Olympia, to cross over to the calm haven of our souls, Christ our God. Victorious in the good fight, you are numbered in the choir of the pious confessors. As you guided all those in your care to the Savior of our souls, guide our minds to Him, O holy Deaconess.

Kontakion

St. Olympia the Deaconess, Confidante of St. John Chrysostom

**St. Olympia Mission
Potsdam, NY
April 1, 2015
by Dr. David C. Ford
St. Tikhon's Orthodox Seminary**

saintolympiaorthodoxchurch.org/index.php/resources/9-st-olympia-the-deaconess

The little girl who would become the exceptionally beautiful, highly astute, very devout St. Olympia the Deaconess was born around the year 362 into a pagan family in the upper aristocracy of the imperial city of Constantinople. Her father was a count of the Empire, named Seleucus, and her mother was named Alexandra.

Olympia's paternal grandfather was the Praetorian prefect and consul Ablabius. Ablabius was also a senator in the time of St. Emperor Constantine the Great. And it was this Ablabius who amassed the stupendous fortune that would be passed down to Olympia.

Olympia's parents died when she was still young, so she was brought up under the guardianship of an uncle, named Procopius, who was a pious Christian, as was her governess, Theodosia. Together they raised her in the love and nurture of Christ, inculcating in her a great, burning love for Him.

This Theodosia was a sister of St. Amphilochius, Bishop of Iconium, a close friend of St. Basil the Great. Olympia's uncle Procopius was a close friend of St. Gregory the Theologian, who took a great interest in her after he came to Constantinople in 379, and she became a benefactor – though she was only about 17 years old at the time – of the Church of the Anastasia (the Resurrection) where St. Gregory preached his famous sermons against the Arians which gained him the title “The Theologian.”

At about the age of 21, she married a man of high rank named Nebridius. St. Gregory could not attend the wedding due to ill health, so instead he wrote a letter along with a poem to her. In this poem he refers to her as “a mirror of a Christian woman.” Later, she prompted St. Gregory of Nyssa to write his Commentary on the Song of Songs to her, as we can see from the way he addresses her in the opening words of the prologue of this work:

Greetings in the Lord, to the most worthy Olympia, from Gregory, Bishop of Nyssa. I have learned of your concern for the Song of Songs which you have expressed to me both in person and by your letters. . . . I have eagerly accepted your solicitude regarding this task. I do not offer you anything that would benefit your conduct, for I am persuaded that your soul's eye is pure from every passionate, unclean thought, and that it looks without hindrance at God's grace by means of these divine words of the Song (Prologue of the Commentary, Casimir McCambley, trans.; Hellenic College Press, 1987, p. 35).

So we can see that Olympia had close connections in very high places in the Church.

After a short period of married life lasting less than 20 months, Olympia's husband died, leaving her a young widow with an immense fortune, including estates in Thrace, Galatia, Cappadocia, and Bithynia, as well as numerous properties in Constantinople itself. Since she was of the upper aristocracy, her situation came to the attention of Emperor Theodosius the Great, who naturally assumed that she should and would want to remarry. Indeed, he even selected a kinsman of his, named Elpidius, to be her new husband. However, she adamantly refused to even consider such a possibility, and instead dedicated the rest of her life to consecrated celibacy in service to the Church, of which she was already an ardent supporter.

When Theodosius heard this, he ordered her vast properties to be confiscated and held in trust for her until her thirtieth birthday, until she agreed to the proposed union. Still she refused, saying,

“You have demonstrated towards my lowly person a kindness most becoming an emperor and commendable in a bishop when you entrusted this great burden, which has been my worry, to proper administration. You will do much better should you order it to be distributed to the poor and the churches. I have been praying for quite a while that I be set free from the embarrassment of vainglory which would be mine if I distributed it to charity. Let me not be so seduced by earthly things so as to lose the soul's true riches” (Palladius, Dialogue on the Life of St. John Chrysostom; ACW, vol. 45, p. 114).

Perhaps appreciating the “spunkiness” of her reply, he soon thereafter restored control of her vast inheritance to her, allowing her to dispose of her wealth as she saw fit.

As W. R. W. Stephens says in his introduction to his translation of five of the letters written to her by St. John Chrysostom from his exile (these letters are given in the NPNF, first series, vol. IX, pp. 289-303),

Henceforward her time and wealth were devoted to the service of the Christian religion. She ministered to the necessities of the sick and poor, and supported the work of the Church in Greece, Asia Minor, and Syria with such lavish donations, not only of her money but of her land, that even Chrysostom, who might be called the great preacher of almsgiving, warned her against indiscriminate liberality, reminding her that as her wealth was a trust committed to her by God, she ought to be discreet in the management of it (p. 287).

Even before the great Chrysostom came from Antioch to Constantinople early in 398 to be the new archbishop there, Olympia had established a monastery in a palace on one of her own properties, which directly adjoined the great cathedral in the capital city. She had begun to live a life of great asceticism there, along with several relatives and about fifty of her servants. In time, the monastery grew to house about 250 female ascetics.

Some time after turning 30 years old, she was ordained as a deaconess by Chrysostom's predecessor as archbishop of Constantinople, Nectarius. Palladius, Chrysostom's biographer, says that “blessed Nectarius . . . took her advice on ecclesiastical policy as well” (ACW, vol. 45, p. 115). A modern biographer of St. John Chrysostom describes this period of her life in these words:

Highly educated, and well grounded in the Scriptures, she had placed her services at the disposal of Archbishop Nektarios. The courtly old man so valued her charitable generosity, and found her advice on church affairs so helpful, that he ordained her a deaconess when she was still in her early thirties, notwithstanding the ban imposed by St. Paul [1 Tim. 5:9], and quite recently reaffirmed by Emperor Theodosius, on consecrating widows under the age of sixty (J. N. D. Kelly, *Golden Mouth: The Story of John Chrysostom, Ascetic, Preacher, Bishop* [Baker Books, 1995], p. 113).

The deaconess Olympia probably became close friends quite quickly with the new archbishop John the Golden-Mouthed, so alike as they were in their ardent love for Christ and His Holy Church, their devotion to reading the Holy Scriptures, and their love and appreciation for the ascetic life. Stephens describes her ascetic endeavors in these terms:

She practiced the most austere asceticism, renouncing the luxury of the bath [except for rare exceptions], wearing none but old, coarse clothing, and subjecting herself to severe restrictions in regard to food and sleep (op. cit., p. 287).

In addition to their strong common interests, since John was about 15 years older than she, perhaps she saw him as a kind of father-figure – or at least as a much older brother – especially since she had scarcely known her own father. And he saw her as a spiritual daughter – or at least as a much younger sister – after his own heart. For one thing, he greatly admired her for the way she resisted the strong pressure to remarry and instead dedicated the rest of her life and her vast wealth to the service of the Church. In this she reminded him of his own mother, Anthusa, who also was widowed at a young age and never remarried.

Truly Archbishop John and Olympia the Deaconess were kindred spirits. The same modern biographer of Chrysostom says,

There was no one in Constantinople with whom he was to have a deeper or more sympathetic understanding, no one with whom he was to feel more at ease or to whom he was to pour out his heart more unreservedly (Kelly, op. cit., p. 113).

Olympia served Archbishop John his meals, trying to make sure that he ate wholesome food which would not overly tax his weak digestive system, which he had injured during his days of severe asceticism as a young monastic living in the caves near the city of Antioch back in the 370s. And she tried to make sure that he ate enough to keep him from becoming too weakened through his tendency towards immoderate asceticism. Later, when St. John was illegally deposed at the infamous Synod of the Oak in June of 403 in Constantinople, one of the many trumped up charges brought against him was that he ate alone with women. It's also true that he did not host lavish banquets for the clergy as his predecessor Nectarius had done, and that was missed by the more worldly-minded of the clergy!

Although very quickly brought back from exile in the summer of 403 by the Empress Eudoxia, St. John's various enemies continued to stir up trouble against him, and he was sent into exile again in June of the following year; this time, he would not return while alive. But he immediately began sending letters to his beloved confidante, Olympia, to assure her of his well-being and to inquire after her health and welfare. For her part, she and the rest of St. John's most devoted followers suffered varying degrees of persecution from those who had unjustly maneuvered to get him exiled, so her welfare was very much in danger.

But her worst affliction after John was sent off into exile was her tendency to fall into despondency and even depression, so difficult it was for her to accept what had happened to her beloved father/brother figure and spiritual counselor. Helping her to overcome and resist this tendency became the main theme of the 17 letters (that have come down to us) that he wrote to her during the three years of his exile, before his death in 407. Indeed, his most favorite theme in all his preaching and writing was how to accept unjust suffering graciously and nobly.

Olympia was twice put on trial on the absurd charge of having started the huge fire that broke out at the moment when John was seized in the cathedral and led off into exile for the last time. Each time she was released after her spirited defense of herself, saying, in effect, "I who have helped build so many churches am not in the habit of burning them down" (Sozomen, Ecclesiastical History VIII.24; NPNF 2, vol. II, p. 415). Then, some time in the following year, 405, she left the capital in a kind of semi-forced, self-imposed exile and settled in Nicomedia in western Asia Minor.

Olympia's beloved mentor and confidant, St. John Chrysostom, died on a forced march to a place of further exile in eastern Asia Minor on September 14, 407. We do not know if she ever learned of this, or if she did, how she responded. Most likely, she reposed in the Lord in the following year, on July 25, 408. Hence she is commemorated in our Holy Church on July 25.

Olympia was of such renown that a Life of her was written by an anonymous author shortly after her repose in the Lord. Another Life of her was written by a later abbess of her monastery, named Sergia, in the 7th century. She is also mentioned in Palladius's famous Lausiac History and Sozomen's Ecclesiastical History (both from the later 5th century). Sozomen records how Olympia, evincing "great fortitude," valiantly defended herself in court against the false charges that were brought against her (VIII.24; NPNF 2, vol. II, p. 414). And Abbess Sergia's account records various miracles that occurred when St. Olympia's relics were transferred, at Abbess Sergia's direction, from a monastery outside Constantinople to the monastery that Olympia had founded which adjoined the Great Church of the capital city.

Holy Mother Olympia, pray to GOD for us!

Article for *Koinonia*, August 2020

St. Olympia Church has come a long way since February 2012, when we held our first regular Liturgies on the campus of SUNY Potsdam, and had to bring in and set up the altar, icon screen, and all items necessary for each Liturgy. In the past eight years, we have prayed with, taken Holy Eucharist with, and ministered to many people—old friends and new, long-time residents of St. Lawrence County and new additions to our community—especially college students, cradle Orthodox and converts. Within four years, we grew from having Divine Liturgy twice per month, to having Liturgy every Sunday! Early on, we moved from the campus to a private

chapel where we still worship today. Soon, we included Matins on Sunday mornings, and we were able to add Great Vespers on Saturday the summer of 2017. We were starting to worship like a regular Orthodox church!

Our Lord continues to move in the St. Olympia parish beyond our own limited vision. Two years ago, if someone had asked us when we would have a resident priest, we would probably have answered “years from now.” It was barely a dream. Yet by the following summer, His Eminence, Archbishop Michael, had sent Father Peter Irfan to us. Similarly, when we began our first stewardship drive for 2017, we established a building fund. We thought that it would take years to grow the funds necessary for acquiring (much less renovating and maintaining) our own building. Nevertheless, the Lord preempted our timeline again! In April, 2019 we were approached by the Congregational Church of Norwood, NY, located about six miles north of Potsdam. This congregation was founded 1858 and the church building was dedicated in 1862. The trustees of this parish's diminishing population were convinced that the church must remain a sacred space; they wanted their sanctuary to transfer to another church rather than have the property become a business establishment--they wanted to *give* us their building! Archbishop Michael met with our parish last October, and with his blessing, we began the legal process of acquiring the building. We have completed all of the paperwork for the transfer of property, and are waiting to hear back from the state.

[Update: We moved into the building in 2021!](#)

Converting the sanctuary into an Orthodox worship space will take some time. Underneath much-deferred maintenance, needed repairs, aged systems and necessary renovations is a building with a strong foundation. With the ever-present support of Archbishop Michael, much of the construction and repairs can be completed by teams of volunteers from the Diocese. Of course all such plans are on hold while we wait out the pandemic. Meanwhile we continue to enjoy our beautiful chapel at the home of one of our parishioners.

[Update: The organ has left the building and our altar area has expanded!](#)

In the past year or so, we have expanded our outreach and education offerings with Orthodox film nights, Byzantine chant classes, and short teaching units for our young children as well as continuing educational material in our weekly bulletin. We had five new catechumens; three have already been chrismated. Three new families from the far ends of the North Country have joined our congregation, each driving about an hour and a half to come to Liturgy. Father Peter continues his heart-felt weekly ministry at the Saint Lawrence County Correctional Facility and visits Orthodox residents at local nursing homes. Last summer we participated in Potsdam's Summer Festival displaying icons and psanky eggs, offering face painting for the children, and meeting many people most of whom did not know we were in the area.

Every year, again with thanks to Vladyka Michael, we have had a guest speaker at one of the four local college campuses. These events are critical for our outreach as they allow to advertise legally that St. Olympia Orthodox Mission exists, otherwise prohibited because our private chapel is not zoned for worship. Presentations by Orthodox theologians and scholars have included: *Theology and Ecology; Encountering Angels - Celestial Images in Orthodox Iconography; Tears on the Equator: The Story of an Orthodox Medical Missionary in Africa; Are You Saved? An Orthodox Christian Perspective; The Reintegration of Military Personnel Returning from Combat, A Spiritual Perspective; Eastern Christian Insights for the Book of Revelation; Love: A Christian Path to Holiness...* and the list goes on. Each lecture has been preceded by a Vespers service and followed by coffee and pastries to allow us time to spread the word about our church to the broader public. In addition, we have also shown films and slide presentations on campus, and have had the spiritual honor of hosting the miraculous icon of St. Anna, mother of the Theotokos.

During the pandemic, we were blessed to continue Sunday Liturgy without interruption. We rotated chanters and parishioners, and started to livestream some Liturgies on Facebook this summer. It was a relief when we could move from three people to ten households as the lock-down restrictions loosened. To do this and still safely distance, we used the adjacent dining room and living room of the house that has the chapel for "overflow."

With Archbishop Michael's blessing, Mother Sophronia hosted St Olympia's Feast Day at the Hermitage of St Olympia with Father Peter serving Liturgy. This was followed by our first (and only) fellowship meal since the pandemic began. Prior to the pandemic, we had served a full meal after every liturgy--it was a special time for us to socialize and was an additional attraction for our college student population.

Mother Sophronia's presence in the North Country is a continual blessing, from her prayer, to daily Vespers, and occasional Liturgies. This year some Presanctified Liturgies were served at the Hermitage before the

lockdown began. She has also accepted the commission--and the donation of much of her work--to writing new icons for our iconostasis. So many icons made through her hands and prayer already grace our sanctuary.

One of our founding members, and also our head chanter/choir director, Dr. Jessica Suchy-Pilalis, was commissioned to compose fourteen of the Byzantine hymn settings included on the Boston Byzantine Choir's latest CD, *Twelve Days*. Then Ancient Faith Radio interviewed her in the series "A Sacrifice of Praise" in three podcasts in January, reflecting on her "four decades of pioneering musical service and scholarship". The first two parts focus on Jessica's journey from a musical upbringing, to her education and training, then to her ongoing professional work. The third segment describes Jessica's preparation and compositional process. These podcasts are truly delightful! Even those of us who have worshipped with Jessica for years and know her vision for Byzantine chant were excited to hear this more complete account of her pioneering life. She has also contributed hymns to the OCA's Liturgical Music and Texts website.

There have been so many events cancelled due to the pandemic including Vladyka Michael's much-anticipated annual Lenten visit for Presanctified Liturgy, Mother Sophronia's Lenten Retreat, many Holy Week services, not to mention our precious weekly fellowship time. Yet we have been blessed through the resources of the Diocese, the livestreaming from monasteries and churches, and especially the presence of Christ in our homes and our hearts. Glory to God for all things!

Thank you for your prayers for our mission! Through these, St Olymphia Orthodox Church will continue to blossom in Northern New York.



With the organ and without the organ! Come see our new altar area!