



**Welcome to St. Olymphia Orthodox Church,  
a young and, God willing, growing community of worshippers.**

**Our priest is Fr. Peter Irfan, Acting Rector.  
You may reach him at 716-342-8520 (cell) or at fatherpeter777@yahoo.com.**

**Please join us for prayer and fellowship.  
Divine Liturgies are held every Sunday at 10 am.  
Great Vespers are held every Saturday evening at 5 pm.**

## Next Services

**Saturday, December 22nd**

**Great Vespers  
5:00 pm**

*Fr. Peter is available to hear confessions before Vespers by appointment.*

**Sunday, December 23rd**

**Matins  
8:45 am**

**Divine Liturgy  
10:00 am**

**Fellowship to follow at**

**St. Olymphia Chapel  
123 Main Street  
Potsdam, NY**



**Come worship the Nativity of Christ with us!**

**Monday, December 24th - Great Vespers at 6:30 pm  
Tuesday, December 25th - Matins at 8:45 am & Divine Liturgy at 10:00 am**

## 29th Sunday of Pentecost - 1 Timothy 1:15-17

*Note: the following article was written by an anonymous contributor.  
It is included here by permission.*

Paul the Apostle is a fascinating fellow. Here's a man, born a Levite and a Pharisee, who taught the Scriptures to the people and was a member of the Jewish elite. He had influence and power within the Temple; he was respected as a man of wealth and learning; and he was also born a Roman citizen, the highest honor and privilege his world knew. Saul, as he was known at the time, had everything going for him.

Then along came this Man from Nazareth, teaching strange and dangerous views of the Scriptures which challenged the authority of the religious establishment, and making weird claims about being the Son of God. So the Jewish religious leadership decided this Jesus had to go, assuming that once Jesus was crucified, His movement and His followers would fade away. But after Jesus' death, His followers became even more dedicated to spreading His Good News. So Saul led the charge to persecute them. The first martyr to this new religion, Stephen, was stoned to death while Saul looked on approvingly. And Saul spent time going from town to town arresting the followers of Jesus arrested and throwing them in jail.

But on a trip to Damascus, Jesus appeared to Saul and called to him, and called him to be an Apostle, just as He did with His other eleven disciples. After his conversion, which is dated to somewhere 31-36 AD, within two to three years after Jesus' death, Saul spent the rest of his life supporting and building up the religion he tried to stamp out. He became known by his Roman name, Paul, sometime early during his evangelizing; it was sort of a new name for a new man. And in the end this Paul who, as Saul of Tarsus, had persecuted the followers of Jesus Christ, now absolutely refused to renounce his faith in Jesus Christ, and suffering death by beheading for his faith during the time of the Roman Emperor Nero.

And right up to the moment of his death, Paul could not but express his gratitude for the way the risen Jesus had changed his whole life. In 1 Timothy 1:12-13 he says, "I thank Christ Jesus our Lord Who has enabled me, because He counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry, although I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man; but I obtained mercy." Paul stands amazed at God's gift, not only of apostolic ministry, but more importantly the forgiveness and grace, reconciliation and peace, that God chose to give to him who had been so violent, so wicked.

Yet in today's Epistle, 1 Timothy 1:15-17, Paul insists that "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief." That "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners" is mind-bending enough. Human being always struggle to grasp the wonder of God's forgiveness and grace, because that forgiveness and grace cannot be earned, bought, deserved or worked for, only received as a free gift from the God Who is pure love. Because we know only too well (as one old prayer puts it) our own "manifold sins and wickedness, which we from time to time most grievously have committed against Thy divine Majesty, provoking most justly Thy wrath and indignation against us," we know we deserve punishment and are afraid we're gonna get it. That's why John 3:16-17 assures us, that "God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved."

But sometimes we wonder if God's love and forgiveness extend this far, even to my sin? Over the years I've heard the Confessions of women from the former Soviet Union who, as many women then were not only allowed but encouraged to do, had one or more abortions. Each and every one of these poor souls were tormented by the fear that not even God could or would forgive this sin; that this was so big, so evil, that not even the shed blood of Jesus Christ could wash it away. Their sense of condemnation was so great that even when I showed them in black and white the blessed promise of 1 John 1:9 that "if we confess our sins, [God] is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness," it was a struggle for these women to trust that Word of God.

Was that Paul's story? Was he was thinking about his former life as a persecutor of Christ and His Church? Did he still feel guilty about being the person who supervised Stephen's execution? Did the faces of the men, women, and children he'd arrested and shipped off to Jerusalem in chains still haunt his dreams? Even though Paul rejoices in verse 16 that despite his unworthiness "I obtained mercy," still, like the publican in our Lord's parable of the Publican and the Pharisee, from the moment of his conversion onward, Paul saw only one sinner in his universe: himself.

But was Paul really the chief of sinners? Haven't there been people since Paul, like Hitler or Stalin or Mao, who deserve that title more than Paul? What about the serial killers and rapists who keep surfacing in our society? If we take even a superficial look around us, we'll see people obviously worse than Paul. And what about us? In the prayer before Communion the Church teaches us to think and to say, "I believe, O Lord, and I confess that You are truly the Christ, the Son of the living God, Who came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am first." So who is the chief of sinners?

But it's not a contest or a comparison. The truth is that like Paul, and like the publican in the parable, you and I each live in a two-person universe; there's God, and there's our own self; and in that universe there's only one sinner. If we truly wish to seek out the chief of sinners, our search ends with the face we see in our mirror. Can you or I point to anyone throughout human history, and say honestly that I live my life better than they? I may not have performed the atrocities some people have done; but, says in Jeremiah 17:9, my heart too "is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked." Many times I've called or thought of someone else as a fool; and that, says our Lord in Matthew 5:22, makes me a murderer "in danger of hell fire." I have worshiped idols by putting other things, other priorities, ahead of God, and by putting my trust in my own hands rather than placing myself in His. I'm not as faithful as Paul. There's no way I can express my faith and love of God as wonderfully as he has in his works. I know my walk with Christ isn't (yet) as trusting as his; and when faced with adversity and trial, I cannot say I'm as strong as Paul. Paul called himself chief of sinners; but how can he be, when I'm not nearly as faithful a person as he? There is no way he can be chief of sinners, because when I look into the mirror, I see the chief of sinners looking back at me. And so do you.

Have you ever noticed how we can look past the sins of others but be unforgiving to our own? How easily (if we've the courage) we can look at our lives and see all the sins we've committed, knowing that there are many, many more sins we don't realize we've committed. And we know full well that all we deserve is God's wrath and punishment.

But that's not what God wants for us. 2 Peter 3:9 assures us that God "is long-suffering toward us, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance." Because God loves us, He doesn't want us to be forever separated from Him and His love. That's why, through His grace and mercy, God made a way for us to be with Him, a way for our original sinless condition to be restored to us. God gave His only begotten Son, Jesus, to us as a sacrifice for us, to stand in our place. Jesus took upon His shoulders our sins as His own; and in His Passion and Death He suffered each and every consequence due to each and every sin of each and every person that has even been, is, and will be; that's why 1 John 2:2 shares with us the joyful news that Jesus "Himself is the propitiation [the perfect satisfaction] for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world."

Yet even though Jesus took away your sins and mine, and even though in Him you and I are forgiven, we're still sinners. We continue to break God's Commandments, and we don't do as God would like. You and I are in this war against sin till the moment we die, and we're going to lose more battles than we win. But what God expects, indeed, demands of us, is that with the help of His grace, in the power of His Holy Spirit, we keep fighting, keep trying to show our love and thankfulness to God by doing the right thing. Because of God's grace and mercy I am indeed still the chief of sinners; but I'm also chief of forgiven sinners: still a sinner, and yet forgiven. For which, thanks be to God!