

Quo Vadis

The monthly newsletter of Saints Peter & Paul Orthodox Catholic Church of Bayonne, N.J.
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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

Mirna Malak was 16 years old when she disappeared. She was on her way to church. Her father, Malak Shenouda, told *World Watch Monitor* that his daughter left for Anba Shenouda Coptic Orthodox Church on May 4, 2018, and was expected to return an hour later. She didn’t. The one-hour mark came and went, and Shenouda and his family grew worried. Family members called Mirna’s phone, but she never answered. When they checked with the church, priests and other churchgoers said Mirna was never there. Earlier that day, as Mirna had approached the church, two women and a man sprayed her in the face with potent anesthetics and shoved her into a *tuc-tuc* (a motorized rickshaw). She woke up on a train to Cairo. Cleverly, she pretended to be unconscious, and at the next stop, she was able to slip away without her kidnappers noticing.

While Mirna was able to stage an escape from three people who could have easily overpowered her physically, others are not so fortunate. The panic felt by Shenouda and his family is nothing new for many Christian families. Over the last several years, hundreds of Christian young women have been reported missing from various communities around Egypt what is called “a recurring phenomenon” by *World Watch Monitor*.

- Vivian Adel Youssef, 18, never returned from her secondary school.
- Meray Girgis Sobhy, 19, a second-year student at a local university, took a *tuc-tuc* from her home to go to school, with plans to visit a private tutor before returning home. She never made it to class.
- Briskam Raafat Mikhail Maher, 17, went missing from her grandparents’ house. Her mother had already been taken 10 years ago.
- Rasha Khalaf Thabet Aziz, 18, was shoved into a car by masked men.

- Hoda Atef Ghali Girgis, 16, went missing from church.
- Mary Adly Milad, 40, a married mother of three, never came home from work.
- Christine Lamie, 26, was threatened by a stranger on social media, and later disappeared.

These are not isolated incidents. Many go without being officially reported, since some families don't even file a report for fear of bringing shame on their family. In other cases, police don't bother to investigate. Many families of Coptic girls who have gone missing believe they were kidnapped by Islamic extremists in an attempt to forcibly make them convert to Islam.

The husband of Christine Lamie, Bahaa Girgis, recounts the days leading up to and after her disappearance. He says his wife was forced to convert to Islam. When Christine didn't return home, Girgis started calling relatives and friends, but no one knew where she was. The next day, he reported his wife's disappearance to the police. Four days later after hearing nothing, Girgis went back to the police station to ask for an update. He was surprised to hear from the officer on duty that Christine had gone to a police station the day before, filing a report stating that she wasn't kidnapped and that she had "converted to Islam by her full will." The parents of Mary Girgis Sobhy faced a similar situation. When she didn't return home at the expected time, or answer her phone, her father called the tutor only to learn that his daughter had not attended the class. He searched extensively for Meray in every local hospital and then filed a report with the police—but to no avail.

Last year a former member of a human trafficking ring in Egypt confirmed that kidnappings of Coptic Christian girls and women are likely tied to Muslim extremists. If all goes according to plan, the women are married off to a strict Muslim—solely so that more women are converted to Islam. According to a *Washington Times* article, abductions are part of a campaign to Islamize Egypt's Christian community. Mary Abdelmassih, a Coptic Christian activist, noted that girls as young as 12 are being kidnapped off Egyptian streets regularly, and during their abductions, Muslims shoot photos of the girls being raped as a means of blackmailing them into converting to Islam. In other cases, Coptic women are sent to Saudi Arabia or other Gulf states to work as domestic servants, where they are sexually exploited and physically abused.

According to a Global Christian Relief source, an estimated 80% of families in these situations do not speak publicly due to shame—and because it makes their other daughters less eligible to find a good husband. With an estimated eleven million Christians, Egypt has the largest Christian community of any country in the Middle East. But since the advent of Islam in the region the seventh century, Christians have been treated as second-class citizens, and in modern times the status of Egypt's Christians has grown worse since the 1952 revolution that dethroned the Egyptian monarchy. The rise of radical Islamist groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood has only exacerbated Christian persecution, affecting believers in their villages, neighborhoods, and workplaces. Adding to this persecution is the Egyptian government's low regard for religious freedom and other fundamental rights.

Christians with Muslim backgrounds face enormous pressure from immediate and extended families to return to Islam. Severe restrictions on building or securing places for communal worship are designed to prevent Christians from gathering together, in addition to hostility and violence. Radical imams regularly incite hostility and violence towards Christians, resulting in the deaths and injuries of many believers in the past year alone. Christian women regularly face discrimination and abuse in their workplaces and the public square. And as persecution continues in Egypt, Coptic families fear their daughters may be the next victims of kidnapping and forced conversion.

According to Engy Magdy, a Cairo-based journalist, Christian women and other religious minorities who don't cover their heads in public are targets:

"Most Muslim women in Egypt wear the *hijab* and, therefore, the others who do not wear it are most likely Coptic. This means that the Egyptian man thinks he has the right to harass her, simply because he sees her as a whore and a disbeliever. You may think that I am talking about a certain class of men, but in fact, most Muslim men (not all, but the majority) view the Coptic woman as easy prey. He thinks that he will have a religious reward if he can manipulate her emotionally and persuade her to marry him, or to convert to Islam, a phenomenon prevalent in Upper Egypt."

In Egypt, a missing person case cannot be filed until a family member or friend has been missing for more than 24 hours. But even after the 24-hour mark, police are in some cases biased against Christians, according to Magdy. The police sometimes don't even open an investigation if they know the victim is a Christian. When the family of a missing Christian woman reports to the authorities, police are slow to react or respond. "Because local police are more often than not in collusion with the kidnappers, the families have to come up with enormous sums to get their daughters back," stated an article from the *Washington Times*. "If the family is poor, their daughter is gone forever."

What's even worse is that often the community will defend the harassers against the allegations of harassed women, adding that in some cases where women report harassment, they are told not to "get caught up in a scandal" because "shame will be on you." According to Magdy, Christian women are afraid to file reports because they fear police will discriminate against them if they do. "Perhaps the most blatant example is Souad Thabet, a 72-year-old Coptic woman who was stripped naked by a Muslim mob and paraded around her village in Upper Egypt in May 2016," Magdy recalls. "None of the perpetrators were sentenced in her attack." Magdy claims that Egyptian society is in a state of "duality," in which it proclaims the importance of "liberation and enlightenment," but does not live out those ideals.

Christianity has been present in Egypt since the first century when St. Mark the Evangelist brought the Gospel to Roman-controlled Alexandria. Egypt was a Christian nation until the Arabs invaded in the seventh century. Ever since, Coptic Christians have survived under shifting Muslim regimes and caliphates. Under Islamic rule, Christians could either leave the country, convert to Islam, or pay a tax. Those who opted to remain Christian and pay the tax were tattooed with a small cross on their right hand or wrist for identification. It was meant as a public symbol of shame and ostracism. While the conversion tax is now illegal in Egypt, Coptic Christians have proudly adopted the cross tattoo as a permanent and public sign of their history and allegiance to Christ, especially in the face of still ongoing persecution.

Since 1978, the United States has provided Egypt with over \$50 billion in military aid and \$30 billion in economic assistance. While much good has resulted from this assistance, it represents a prioritization of geopolitical interests over human rights—proven, for example, by the fact that on September 14, 2023 the Biden Administration specifically waived human rights conditions so as to provide \$235 million of security assistance to the Egyptian government. It is time we stand alongside our Christian brethren in Egypt, and demand that our country's foreign aid to Egypt be tied to equal rights for Christians and other minorities. And let us continue to speak out to anyone who will listen about the suffering of the Christians in the Middle East, and question where were all these university campus demonstrators when genocide and ethnic cleansing was being committed against Christians in the Middle East? Do they even realize that Christianity is still the most persecuted religion in the world, and that in almost every case the persecutors are either Muslims or Communists? Or is this an "inconvenient truth" that they simply don't want to hear?

Excerpt from the Church Fathers

"From all which we learn that the person of the Holy Spirit was of such authority and dignity, that saving baptism was not complete except by the authority of the most excellent Trinity of them all, i.e., by the naming of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and by joining to the unbegotten God the Father, and to His only-begotten Son, the name also of the Holy Spirit."

— Origen (185-254), *De principiis*, Book I, Chapter IV

Lives of the Saints

St. Irene Chrysovalantou, Abbess – commemorated on July 28th

St. Irene was the daughter of a wealthy family from Cappadocia, and was born in the ninth century. After the death of her husband Emperor Theophilus, the Empress Theodora¹ ruled the Byzantine Empire as Regent for her young son, Emperor Michael III. When Michael was twelve years of age, St. Theodora sent messengers throughout the Empire to find a suitably virtuous and refined girl to be his wife. St. Irene was chosen, and she agreed to the marriage. While passing Mt. Olympus in Asia Minor, Irene asked to stop so she could receive the blessing of St. Joannicius, who lived on the mountain. The saint, who showed himself only to the worthiest pilgrims, foresaw the arrival of St. Irene, and also her future life. The holy ascetic welcomed her and told her to proceed to Constantinople, where the women's monastery of Chrysovalantou had need of her. Amazed at his clairvoyance, St. Irene fell to the ground and asked St. Joannicius for his blessing. After blessing her and giving her spiritual counsel, he sent her on her way. When the party arrived in Constantinople, St. Irene's relatives met her with great ceremony. Since "the steps of a man are rightly ordered by the Lord" (Ps. 37:23), God arranged for Michael to marry another girl a few days before, so that Irene might be free to become a bride of Christ. Far from being disappointed, St. Irene rejoiced at this turn of events. Remembering the words of St. Joannicius, St. Irene visited the Monastery of Chrysovalantou. She was so impressed by the nuns and their way of life that she freed her slaves and distributed her wealth to the poor. She exchanged her fine clothing for the simple garb of a nun, and served the sisters with great humility and obedience. The abbess was impressed with the way that Irene performed the most menial and disagreeable tasks without complaint.

St. Irene often read the Lives of the Saints in her cell, imitating their virtues to the best of her ability. She often stood in prayer all night with her hands raised like Moses on Mt. Sinai (Exodus 17:11-13). St. Irene spent the next few years in spiritual struggles defeating the assaults of the demons, and bringing forth the fruits of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23). When the abbess sensed the approach of death, she told the other nuns that they should not accept anyone but Irene as the new abbess. St. Irene was not told of the abbess's instructions, and when she died the community sent representatives to go and seek the advice of the patriarch, St. Methodius. He asked them whom they wanted as their superior and they replied that they believed he would be guided by the Holy Spirit. Without knowing of the late abbess's instructions to the nuns, he asked if there was a humble nun by the name of Irene in their monastery. If so, he said, they should choose her. The nuns rejoiced and gave thanks to God. St. Methodius elevated St. Irene to the rank of abbess and advised her how to guide those in her charge.

St. Irene displayed great wisdom in leading the nuns, and received many revelations from God to assist her in carrying out her duties. She also asked for the gift of clairvoyance so that she would know what trials awaited her nuns. Thus, she was in a better position to give them the proper advice. She never used this knowledge to embarrass others, but only to correct their confessions in a way which let them know that she possessed certain spiritual gifts. Although St. Irene performed many miracles during her life, let us mention only one. On Great Feasts it was her habit to keep vigil in the monastery courtyard under the starry skies. Once, a nun who was unable to sleep left her cell and went into the courtyard. There she saw Abbess Irene levitating a few feet above the ground, completely absorbed in prayer. The astonished nun also noticed that two cypress trees had bowed their heads to the ground, as if in homage. When she finished praying, St. Irene blessed the trees and they returned to their upright position. Afraid that this might be a temptation from the demons, the nun returned the next night to see if she had been mistaken. Again she saw St. Irene levitating as she prayed, and the cypress trees bowing down. The nun tied handkerchiefs to the tops of the two trees before they went back to their places. When the other sisters saw the

¹ St. Theodora helped to defeat the iconoclast heresy, and to restore the holy icons. We commemorate this victory on the first Sunday of Great Lent as the "Triumph of Orthodoxy."

handkerchiefs atop the trees, they began to wonder who had put them there. Then the nun who had witnessed these strange events revealed to the others what she had seen. When St. Irene learned that the nun had witnessed the miracle and told the others, she was very upset. She warned them not to speak of it to anyone until after her death.

St. Irene observed the Feast of St. Basil the Great (January 1) with great devotion, since he also came from Cappadocia. One year, after celebrating the feast, St. Irene heard a voice during the night telling her to welcome the sailor who would come to the door the next day. She was told to rejoice and eat the fruit which the sailor would bring her. During Matins, a sailor did come to the door and remained in church until after Liturgy. He told her that he had come from Patmos, where he boarded a ship. As the ship set sail, he noticed an old man on the shore calling for them to stop. In spite of a good wind, the ship came to a sudden halt. Then the old man walked across the water and entered the ship. He gave the sailor three apples which God was sending to the patriarch "from His beloved disciple John." Then the old man gave the sailor three more apples for the abbess of Chrysovalantou. He told the sailor that if Irene ate the apples, all that her soul desired would be granted, "for this gift comes from John in Paradise."

St. Irene offered a prayer of thanksgiving, with tears of joy, for St. John the Theologian, Apostle and Evangelist, and beloved disciple of Christ. The sailor asked for a blessing and left the monastery. Irene fasted for a week, thanking God for the apples. After this, she ate small pieces of the first apple daily, without any other form of sustenance, for forty days; when she ate, she smelt as if she was exuding myrrh; during this time, the remaining apples became more beautiful and aromatic. On Holy Thursday, she directed her sisterhood to receive Holy Communion; after the Liturgy, the second apple was divided between them; when eaten, so sweet was the taste that the sisters felt as if their souls were being fed. The third apple was kept until St. Irene would know what to do with it. On Good Friday, during the singing of the hymns of the Passion, Irene had a vision of countless radiant angelic beings entering the church: some with stringed instruments, singing beautiful hymns to God; others with goblets of myrrh, to be poured onto the altar, which filled the monastery with a wonderful fragrance. Among these beings was a particularly majestic man, a face radiant like the sun, who was treated with devotion. He approached the altar and, taking the shroud offered to him by the other beings, covered the now-fragrant altar. The angel who stood by the altar, with great sadness, cried out to the majestic one, "Until when, O Lord?" to which a voice replied, "Until the second Solomon, when the heights will be united with the depths and all will be one. Then the Lord will be exalted and the memory of Irene will be glorified." St. Irene took this as confirmation of her teaching that no one, whether herself or another of the sisters, could be glorified until they achieved the Kingdom in death. St. Irene gathered the community, reiterating the necessity of running from worldly honor to achieve and behold the glory of God.

In accordance with angelic prophecy, that Irene would repose on the day after St. Panteleimon's feast day, the monastery kept the day before St. Panteleimon as a feast to celebrate the anniversary of the monastery's founding. Irene spent the whole week prior to that in preparation. She spent all of her days in meditation and fasting, drinking water and eating only small pieces from the last remaining apple, eaten because she felt her time of repose to be near. As soon as she ate the first fragment all enmity disappeared from the monastery, and the monastery was filled with fragrance from the apple. On July 28th, St. Irene called the nuns together in order to bid them farewell. She also told them to select Sister Mary as her successor, for she would keep them on the narrow way which leads to life (Matthew 7:14). After entreating God to protect her flock from the power of the devil, she smiled when she saw the angels who had been sent to receive her soul. Then she closed her eyes and surrendered her soul to God. St. Irene was more than 101 years old when she died, yet her face appeared young and beautiful. A great crowd of people came for her funeral, and many miracles took place at her tomb. It is customary in some Greek Orthodox parishes to bless apples on the feast of St. Irene Chrysovalantou on July 28th.

Countless miracles surround St. Irene. First of these was the fragrance, the same present at the funeral, which continued at the saint's grave for years. Numerous miracles have occurred at the site, and many prayers for St. Irene's intercessions are continually answered. One such series of miracles is for mothers who are unable to conceive: after asking for St. Irene's intercessions, often a child is born, and the parents will name their child after the saint. In 1930, many people witnessed an apparition of St. Irene digging the foundations for the convent in Attica, Greece that was then built in her memory. Locally, there is a miraculous icon of St. Irene Chrysovalantou kept at the Sacred Patriarchal and Stavropegial Monastery of St. Irene Chrysovalantou (Ecumenical Patriarchate) in Astoria, Queens, New York.

Frequently Asked Questions

Why do Orthodox kiss icons? Does kissing icons mean that Orthodox Christians worship the icon or the person portrayed?

Icons, the painted images of Jesus Christ, the Virgin Mary, the saints, or sacred events, are very important in Eastern Orthodox worship. These icons mean far more to us than ordinary paintings. Icons are windows into the sacred realm, into the kingdom of God. The persons portrayed on these wooden icons are, in a spiritual way, present with us. We kiss the icon to show love and respect, even as we might kiss the picture of a family member to show the same. However, only God (the Holy Trinity — the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit) is worthy of worship or “adoration.” The Virgin Mary and the saints are worthy of our deepest honor and love, or what is called “veneration.” As was said above, even as we might kiss a picture of a loved one, so we kiss the icons to show our love and respect for these spiritual beings who are alive with Jesus Christ and, therefore, with us in worship. By venerating icons we do not transgress the commandment against idolatry, as they are not objects of adoration, but rather obey the commandment to honor our fathers and mothers (i.e., our spiritual fathers and mothers).

Recipe of the Month

ZUCCHINI PIZZA CASSEROLE

This recipe by “Taste of Home” contest winner Lynn Bernstetter of White Bear Lake, Minnesota is a great way to use the seasonal zucchinis from your home garden or bought from the market. It is appealing not only to those with hearty appetites, but with children as well, and takes no longer than an hour to prepare.

INGREDIENTS

- 4 cups shredded unpeeled zucchini
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 2 large eggs
- 1/2 cup grated Parmesan cheese
- 2 cups shredded part-skim mozzarella cheese, divided
- 1 cup shredded cheddar cheese, divided
- 1 pound ground beef
- 1/2 cup chopped onion
- 1 can (15 ounces) Italian tomato sauce
- 1 medium green or sweet red pepper, chopped

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Preheat oven to 400° F. Place zucchini in colander; sprinkle with salt. Let stand 10 minutes, then squeeze out moisture.

2. Combine zucchini with eggs, Parmesan and half the mozzarella and cheddar cheeses. Press into a greased 13 x 9 in. or 3 qt. baking dish. Bake 20 minutes.
3. Meanwhile, in a large saucepan, cook beef and onion over medium heat until meat is no longer pink, breaking meat into crumbles; drain. Add tomato sauce; spoon over zucchini mixture. Sprinkle with remaining cheeses; add green pepper. Bake until heated through, about 20 minutes longer.

TIPS

- Can you freeze Zucchini Pizza Casserole? Yes. Cool baked casserole; cover and freeze. To use, partially thaw in refrigerator overnight. Remove from refrigerator 30 minutes before baking. Preheat oven to 350°. Unwrap casserole; reheat on a lower oven rack until heated through and a thermometer inserted in center reads 165° F.
- Can you make it vegetarian? Yes. Make it vegetarian by skipping the meat and increasing the veggies. Mushrooms or finely chopped cauliflower (or a combination of the two) taste great.

Parish News

Congratulations

Miss Danielle Kovach of Clark, New Jersey, daughter of Jerome Kovach and Margaret Cimboric, and Mr. Gregory J. Turk of Broadview Heights, Ohio, son of Gregory F. Turk and Alexandra Valukievic, were married in our church on June 22, 2024. Many Years!

Rector's Vacation

Fr. Sophrony will be away from the evening of July 21, 2024 until the morning of August 2, 2024. A substitute priest, Fr. Paul Kucynda, shall say Divine Liturgy on Sunday, July 28, 2024. In the event of an emergency while Fr. Sophrony is away, please call Fr. John Fencik at 201-436-6604 or the nearest Orthodox priest.

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 August issue, the donation must be recorded in the Special Donations register in the church vestibule by July 14, 2024.

July 14, 2024

Triple Candelabra offered by Fr. W. Sophrony Royer in memory of Louise Evelyn LeBlanc.

July 21, 2024

St. John's Cross offered by Fr. W. Sophrony Royer in memory of Wilfred J. Royer (anniversary of birth).

July 28, 2024

Altar Vigils offered by Tais Fedetz in memory of Matushka Geraldine Fedetz (anniversary of repose).
St. Nicholas' Cross offered by Helen Wanko in memory of Rose Brelinsky (anniversary of repose).

Schedule of Services

July 6-7, 2024

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

July 13-14, 2024

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

June 20-21, 2024

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

July 28, 2024

9:30 AM (Sunday) – Divine Liturgy

Daily Bible Readings

1. Romans 2:28-3:18; Matthew 6:31-34, 7:9-11
2. Romans 4:4-12; Matthew 7:15-21
3. Romans 4:13-25; Matthew 7:21-23
4. Romans 5:10-16; Matthew 8:23-27
5. Romans 5:17-6:2; Matthew 9:14-17
6. Romans 3:19-26; Matthew 7:1-8
7. Romans 2:10-16; Matthew 4:18-23
8. Romans 7:1-13; Matthew 9:36-10:8
9. Romans 7:14-8:2; Matthew 10:9-15
10. Romans 8:2-13; Matthew 10:16-22
11. Romans 8:22-27; Matthew 10:23-31
12. Romans 9:6-19; Matthew 10:32-36, 11:1
13. Romans 3:28-4:3; Matthew 7:24-8:4
14. Romans 5:1-10; Matthew 6:22-33
15. Romans 9:18-33; Matthew 11:2-15
16. Romans 10:11-11:2; Matthew 11:16-20
17. Romans 11:2-12; Matthew 11:20-26
18. Romans 11:13-24; Matthew 11:27-30
19. Romans 11:25-36; Matthew 12:1-8
20. Romans 6:11-17; Matthew 8:14-23
21. Romans 6:18-23; Matthew 8:5-13
22. Romans 12:4-5, 15-21; Matthew 12:9-13
23. Romans 14:9-18; Matthew 12:14-16, 22-30
24. Romans 15:7-16; Matthew 12:38-45
25. Romans 15:17-29; Matthew 12:46-13:3
26. Romans 16:1-16; Matthew 13:4-9
27. Romans 8:14-21; Matthew 9:9-13
28. Romans 10:1-10; Matthew 8:28-9:1
29. Romans 16:17-24; Matthew 13:10-23
30. 1 Corinthians 1:1-9; Matthew 13:24-30
31. 1 Corinthians 2:9-3:8; Matthew 13:31-36

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parish every time you shop!**



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available for purchase in the church vestibule.*