

Christmas Letter: On My Experience of Serving for Two Years in Middlesbrough

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16 December 2025

Christ is born, give glory! Blessed Christmas to everyone in our Church, and to your families!

"How can I get baptised into your church?" Every Sunday, almost without exception, I am asked this question by someone who finds our church. I hear it from people who walk into our services. I receive emails with requests from people interested to embrace the Orthodox faith, to join, as they often say, an apostolic Christian Church. I am confident in telling them that the church they have come to is the one which St Paul established on his missionary journeys to Cyprus and Greece, that our Middlesbrough Greek Orthodox Church of the Annunciation preaches and lives by the example and teaching of the apostles and their successors, in unbroken continuity throughout the ages.

Almost every Sunday, I also meet people who ask for financial help. They come inside the church, or I meet them outside when I arrive or leave the church. People who ask, *"Can I have a word with you, Father"*, but whose needs I soon discover I cannot meet. I have had to learn that, as a priest, I do not have the knowledge, nor the skills, to be a social worker; that in our town there is provision by various charities who offer support to those in need of the basics in life.

What we offer is Prayer. We welcome everyone to our services, and to a cup of coffee afterwards!

I give these two examples – of people seeking baptism, and of those asking for money – to show how I have had to learn to distinguish what it is that I am here to do as a priest, and what not. I am not a social worker, or a teacher of Greek language or Greek dances, even though I speak Greek and was the first to lead the dances on Easter day, in my cassock, with Bishop Raphael's blessing!

We may all have a different idea of what our Church is for. It is right that it be so. Everyone should aim to find a meaning to help connect church experience with real life. And yet, we are also limited. Not just because we have limited resources, but also because we are called to something very specific. Something unique---to serve the Divine Liturgy and to offer the possibility to those called by God to be received into His church and be sustained in weekly celebrations of the Liturgy; to celebrate their Baptisms, Weddings, and to leave this life as Christians with a Burial and Memorial Service. All these tasks require focus and dedication, as well as hard work. We are limited because we have a sacred calling.

Two years ago, this Church had closed its doors. The Community I came to serve had ceased to exist. I was to celebrate in a church to which no one had a key. The door was locked. At the beginning, even the bread and wine for the Liturgy – which are to be the offering of the people – had to be provided by my family, as was the care for the oil lamps, the singing, the reading and the serving in the altar. Soon there were a few faithful souls who responded to the weekly appearances of our "caravan-church". In March 2024, about three months after our first service, we felt that the Church had "happened". I am grateful to God and to His chosen people, whom He was quick to send to rebuild His church.

The help I received from Archbishop Nikitas, Bishop Raphael and Fr David was overwhelming; the support of my dear wife and Presvytera Esther and my family, Liliana-Maria, Anastasia and Symeon – decisive. Thank you from all my heart!

Last Sunday, for the Feast of St Andrew, we had run out of wine for the celebration of the Liturgy. George noticed this and was about to go to Sainsbury's to buy some. He met Fr David at the entrance of the church and told him what had happened. "Wait", said Fr David, "*I have something just for you*". He then went to his car and took out a box with a dozen of bottles of liturgical wine. This box had been a gift he received from a group of pilgrims, all the way from London. *Ἐχει ο Θεός!* God provides! This ancient saying applies fully to the renewed existence of our church. We thank God for not leaving us without His support.

For the year 2026, we look forward to:

- Remaining a church which is open every week for people to worship regularly, be baptised and live as Orthodox Christians;
- Celebrating our 50th anniversary, with Bishop Raphael, on Sun 25 Jan. 2026;
- Applying for a grant with the Middlesbrough Council to help look after our building together with the parish of St Columba;
- Holding our elections in the summer 2026;
- Registering for the Gift Aid scheme;
- Registering for the solemnization of marriages with the General Register Office.

I conclude with a note of gratitude to all. First of all, to George, our President, and to our Committee: Iakovos, Kiki, Alexandros, Alec, as well as to Evangelia our Interim Secretary. To our bakers, and our singers and readers: Thank you all for sharing your gifts and for your dedication!

The celebration of the Liturgy is not the work or the responsibility of the priest on his own. With God's help, it is the joint work of all who worship in our church: from England, Cyprus, Greece, Bulgaria, Albania, Egypt, Syria, Ukraine, Malta, Romania, Latvia, Russia, Kazakhstan, Eritrea etc.

Our sacred task is the same as that outlined by St John Chrysostom, the "preacher with the golden mouth", who lived in the late 4th century (AD 347-407). The Liturgy we celebrate every week is named after him. Let us hear his advice:

"There are occasions in which there is no difference at all between the priest and those under him; for instance, when we are to partake of the awesome mysteries of the Body and Blood of Christ; for we are all alike counted worthy of the same things: not as under the Old Testament when the priest ate some things and those under him others, and it was not lawful for the people to eat of those things of which the priest ate. It is not like this now, but there is one Body and one Cup which are set before all. And one may observe the people contributing in the saying of the prayers too: the priest prays for the people, and the people also pray for the priest – for the words, "With your spirit", are nothing else than this. The offering of the Thanksgiving again is common: for the priest does not give thanks on his own, but also all the people [give thanks] (*οὐδὲ γὰρ ἐκεῖνος εὐχαριστεῖ μόνος ἀλλὰ καὶ ὁ λαὸς ᾗπας*). For only when they give their agreement that "It is meet and right" to do so (*ἀξίως καὶ δικαίως*), then he begins the Thanksgiving (*τότε ἄρχεται τῆς Εὐχαριστίας*). And why do you marvel that the people sometimes say the prayers together with the priest, when they send up the sacred hymns together even with the very Cherubim and the powers above?"

"Now I have said all this in order that each one of the people of God also may watch out, that we may understand that we are all one body, having such difference among us as members with members; and may not throw the whole upon the priests – we ourselves are to care for the whole Church as for a body common to us all" *

*Chrysostom, 'Hom. on Second Corinthians', 18.3