

## **Bp. Bohdan Danylo offers Pilgrimage Divine Liturgy at St. John the Baptist Ukrainian Catholic Church**



On May 25, 2025, Vigil of the Feast of the Ascension, nearly 200 faithful gathered at St. John the Baptist Ukrainian-Greek Catholic Church on Southside in Pittsburgh, PA. Established in 1891, it remains the oldest Ukrainian Catholic Church in Pittsburgh.

Bp. Bohdan Danylo – the current eparch of the Ukrainian Catholic Eparchy of Saint Josaphat in Parma – offered the Vespereal Divine Liturgy as the main celebrant, alongside nine of his priests. Two other priests heard confessions during the Liturgy. The Galician chant was performed superbly both by the cantors and those in the pews.

During his homily, Kyr Bohdan taught that peace only comes from the Risen Christ, Who charges us to spread the Good News of His Resurrection and kingdom to the ends of the earth. When Catholics take their faith seriously and witness to Jesus in public, others can't but be moved. To illustrate this, Vladyka said that many non-Catholics in France started exploring the Catholic faith after seeing the faithful kneeling and crying as the Notre-Dame Cathedral burned. The bishop also made sure to draw attention to the memory of those who came before and built St. John's.

Vladyka also mentioned his meeting with Pope Leo XIV, praising the new Pontiff's use of St. Augustine's theology. Kyr Bohdan also made sure to remind the faithful of the situation in Ukraine, mentioning one parish in the homeland that has held nearly 1,500 funerals since the war began. The Bishop of Parma concluded his homily by challenging his flock to discover how great God truly is and how much He has to offer us when we seek Him.

After the Liturgy, the parish held a large potluck in the parish hall which featured a variety of desserts. People came from several parishes, including ones out of state, for this special event. Nostalgia abounded among the older parishioners during the potluck. At one table, a few people flipped through a 1991 parish directory, reminiscing about the parishioners they knew from back then. Others shared their thoughts about the community.



"I'm not Ukrainian, but I've learned a lot from the Ukrainians," said Fr. John Gribik. Formerly the pastor of St. John's, Fr. Gribik runs Patronage of the Mother of God Ukrainian-Greek Catholic Church in Ford City, PA. Father brought up the parish youth group and its activities, which included monthly events and a youth newspaper. "She helped with a lot," gesturing to Esther Grimm, who stood next to him. Grimm managed the parish's financial records. She and her family are very involved in the church and have volunteered extensively over the years. "I hope it grows," Father remarked. "It's nice seeing so many people here tonight. The people who were there when I was here were wonderful, wonderful people."

"You can feel the community come together," said parishioner Michael Levy. "All the prayers of all our ancestors that worshiped before us in this space, their prayers and sacrifices, can be felt in this space. And that's a real blessing." Levy served the Liturgy alongside his brother Joseph, who are both sons of Deacon Michael Levy, of blessed memory, who had served at St. John's. "Having Kyr Bohdan here helped highlight the importance of the royal priesthood. He's the center of our community."



*From left to right: Fr. Oleg Popyuk, Fr. Kevin Bezner, Fr. Ivan Smereka, Fr. Michael Polosky, Dcn. Myron Spak, Bp. Bohdan Danylo, Fr. Yaroslav Koval, Fr. Ihor Hohosha, Fr. Ivan Chirovsky, Fr. Jason Charron, Fr. Douglas Lorange*

Fr. Kevin Bezner and his wife came all the way from St. Basil the Great Ukrainian-Greek Catholic Church in Charlotte, NC. “It’s a joy to be able to come up here. It’s a wonderful parish,” he said. “The eparchy is fantastic, the priests are wonderful, the bishop is superb. We’re very blessed, and you can see that in the Liturgy: the priests are very prayerful. They love the people.”

Fr. Bezner served as a deacon at St. John’s when he attended Byzantine Catholic Seminary of Sts. Cyril and Methodius in Perrysville. Both he and Fr. Jim Davidson were sent to BCS by Kyr Bohdan for ordination. Even though Fr. Bezner is a priest in the Ukrainian-Greek Catholic Church, he’s learned a lot from the Ruthenians. “You need to observe the priests as a seminarian to be formed properly.”

North Carolina used to have Eastern Catholic missions, but now they have a thriving parish. “Mission life is different, said Fr. Bezner. “Seeing the parishes here gave me a deep love of the priests and parishes.”





A church tour was given by Julie Martin, a long-time parishioner of St. Vladimir Ukrainian-Greek Catholic Church in Arnold, PA. She assists St. John's development team with events and fundraising. Both St. John's and St. Vlad's – along with Nativity of the Mother of God in New Alexandria – are pastored by native Ukrainian Fr. Yaroslav Koval.

Martin explained the long and illustrious history of St. John's. By 1890, approximately twenty-five Ukrainian families were reported to have settled in and around the Southside of Pittsburgh. Back then, the men performed hard labor in the coal mines, steel mills, and factories six days a week, but they still found time to honor Almighty God on Sunday by bringing their families to Divine Liturgy.

Before they had their own church, they obtained permission from St. Adalbert's Catholic Church – a Latin Rite Polish church on South 15th Street, pastored by Fr. Wladyslaw Miskiewicz – to hold Liturgies in the church rectory and parish school building. On September 1, 1891, Fr. Theofan Obushkewich purchased a wooden frame hall from Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church, located at the site of the present church at the center of Seventh and Carson Streets on Southside.

Eventually, the congregation had grown so much that they needed to expand the size of the building. The original Lutheran hall extended from the entrance doors to the end of the low ceiling in the back of the nave. The Protestant influence is apparent by the fact that, unlike the rest of the stained glass windows toward the front of the nave, the ones in the back depict no saints.

Until Vatican II allowed Eastern Catholics to return to their original customs, Greek Catholic churches in the United States were marked by Latin influences in their services, devotions, and

architecture. St. John's was no exception, given the presence of a large canopy in the nave, which is foreign to the Byzantine rite.

The icon screen, painted by the famous iconographer Christina Duchwat, wasn't added until 1975. The conciliar directive to delatinize wasn't a smooth transition; more than a few St. John's parishioners objected to the iconostasis because it meant an end to the Nativity scene set up during the Christmas season. The mosaics on the east walls on both sides of the altar are also recent additions, depicting modern popes and parishioners who contributed to the parish's construction.

Until the 1970s, the onion domes were painted blue. Even after many people have moved out of Southside, the domes remain emblematic of that area. The church took in numerous immigrants who were struggling to find housing following World War II. More than a few famous Ukrainian personages – including Metropolitan Sheptytsky, Major Archbishop Slipyj, and former first lady of Ukraine Kateryna Yushchenko – have visited St. John's.

George Honchar, a cantor from Holy Trinity Ukrainian Catholic Church in Carnegie, PA was deeply moved by the ceremony. "To see the church almost filled to capacity was inspirational! I could almost feel my grandparents' and parents' spirits worshiping with us this past Ascension Thursday Eve!"

Amazingly, many of the people Honchar spoke with during the reception had never come to their "mother church" before. "They had driven by, but 'never had a reason' to worship there. So many of them said that they will definitely return to their 'mother church' – St. John the Baptist Ukrainian Catholic Church – to worship." When they do return, they will certainly be given the warm hospitality and good food that are hallmarks of the Greek Catholic churches in Pittsburgh.



Despite everything the world has done to attempt to make Him seem irrelevant, Christ is still here. And so is His Church. St. John the Baptist Ukrainian-Greek Catholic Church remains a crucial part of the Pittsburgh city skyline, and the prayers and sacrifices of the Greek Catholic faithful remain an integral support of the city's population. The faithful who celebrated the Feast of the Ascension at St. John's this year during the Jubilee Year of Hope were reminded of these things, and they indeed have many reasons to hope.