

# Our Journey to St. Tikhon's Seminary

by

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Why would a 42-year-old man, his wife, and four sons leave sunny, Southern California with a nice house, two good jobs, a wonderful parish, good schools and activities for the children, and drive 3500 miles across the US to attend St. Tikhon's Orthodox Theological Seminary in South Canaan, Pennsylvania? Good question!

I would like to relate something of our journey to St. Tikhon's as an encouragement to you if you are considering the pursuit of theological studies as a preparation for priestly ministry, and also as a testimony to the faithfulness of the Lord. The struggle to discern and accomplish the will of God for one's life is truly a profound mystery unique to each human soul. I am convinced that the Lord lovingly guides His people and encourages us to increase our faith and to trust Him more and more. Hopefully, our experience, how we dealt with obstacles, difficulties and concerns will help you take the next step in following the Lord and His will for your life, wherever that may lead you. *"Without faith it is impossible to please Him. For whoever comes to God must believe that He exists, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him."* (Heb. 11:6)

We faced what seemed to us as insurmountable obstacles in getting to seminary. We owned our own home; we had four thriving and active sons; we had developed a certain lifestyle which required a certain income; we were well integrated into the life and ministry of our local parish and community. We wondered how we would sell or rent our house; we wondered what schools our children would attend and what activities would be available for their development and growth; we wondered where my wife, Stacy, would work (since I would be attending seminary as a full-time student); we wondered how we could make ends meet on a significantly reduced income; we wondered how we could possibly uproot our family of six, move across the country and set up home in new and unfamiliar surroundings. All of this and more left us wondering if we would ever get to seminary, although we felt that this was certainly something the Lord was leading us to do. *"And we know that in everything God works for good with those who love Him and are called according to His purpose."* (Rom. 8:28)

Concerning God's providential timing. Before I describe the obstacles and concerns we faced I would like to point out that we had been hoping for several years to come to seminary, but for one reason or another were unable to do so. Also, our parish priest had wisely counseled us to be patient and to live as Orthodox Christians for several years before even considering going to seminary. He advised five years. We took his advice back in 1992 and then began the application process to St. Tikhon's at the end of that time. I was accepted for the Fall semester of 1997, but our circumstances prevented us from going. The housing market in San Diego was depressed and it would have cost us money to sell our home. We had to wait another year until God's timing was right. I say all this to encourage those with a sense of calling to the priesthood not to lose their vision or commitment to be trained to serve the Lord. I am absolutely convinced that where the Lord leads He also provides. And He does so according to His loving providential care. His

timing is always right. Don't lose heart. Wait on the Lord and be faithful where you are. Trust in His wisdom and goodness. Listen to the counsel of those who know and love you. He will guide and provide for us, and for all those concerned, always with our best interest in mind. When the time is right it will be clear. *"I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope."* (Jer. 29:11)

Concerning our house in San Diego. A major obstacle was what to do with our house in San Diego. The local housing market improved, but we still dreaded going through the selling process. The woman living there now had a vision for establishing a "Mary and Martha house" of hospitality. When she heard that we were planning to go to seminary, she thought that perhaps we could work something out. However, her being on a limited income made it extremely unlikely. She shared her dream with a family friend. He loved her idea and vision and offered to give her one year's mortgage and homeowner's fees *up front* to decide if our home would be suitable to her needs! The Lord graciously provided a solution for this major concern. He was making a way for us to leave. I'm sure He leads and provides for others in other ways, but this is what happened for us. I'm sure this is exactly what we needed. *"My God will supply every need of yours according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus!"* (Phil. 4:19)

Concerning a place to live in Pennsylvania. With our San Diego home taken care of, we now turned our attention to where to live in Pennsylvania. I was in communication with a seminarian, Joseph O'Brien (now Fr. Joseph serving St. Paul's Orthodox Church in Las Vegas) several months earlier. I told him we planned on moving there to go to St. Tikhon's. However, he told me that upon graduation he would be staying for another year for some type of chaplaincy program. It looked like we'd have to live elsewhere. As the time for our departure for seminary drew near, I called Fr. Joseph again. This time (Friday, June 26<sup>th</sup>) he told me that his plans had changed and that he was being ordained to the Holy Priesthood the following Monday, on the Feast of Ss. Peter and Paul. I congratulated him and expressed my interest in the house. He said fine, but that there was someone else also interested, but that he hadn't heard from him for some time. This gentleman was living in Montana, he told us. So, we were still uncertain where we would live.

That Sunday we went to church (in San Diego) as usual. At the end of the service, Fr. Alexander greeted the visitors. There was a gentleman and his children seated in the back, John and family from "Montana"! Could it be?! My wife cornered them after church and sure enough, it was him, the man whom Fr. Joseph had mentioned was also interested in the house! He "happened to be" in San Diego and decided to attend our parish. He told us that his plans were to go to St. Vladimir's Seminary in the Fall and so it would be fine with him if we took the O'Brien's house! (I still am amazed that this happened.) We called Fr. Joseph and confirmed our desire and commitment to live in their house. And that's where we are today! Thanks be to God for His loving providential care! *"O the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways!"* (Rom. 11:33)

Concerning our belongings and the need for new furnishings. We did not bring our furniture and belongings with us; only what we could fit in our two cars with car-top carriers. There is a great expense for moving vans, etc., especially cross-country. We were able to leave most of our furniture set up in our home for our friend to use. Our other things we put in storage in our garage. We shipped about 20 boxes of "essential items" to the local post office which we collected when we arrived. But what about furniture and other furnishings

for our new home? Once again the Lord provided all that we needed--beds, desks, dining room table and chairs, bookshelves, a small couch, etc. Many of these things came from the generosity of local Orthodox Christians. The Lord has allowed us to set up a nice home for ourselves while we're here. Actually, this house is much bigger than our house in San Diego and about \$1000 less per month! *"Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you shall find; knock, and it will be opened...for your Father knows the things you have need of even before you ask Him."* (Mt. 6:8; 7:7)

Concerning employment for Stacy. Stacy did not have a job secured when we left, although she had made a couple of contacts in the Scranton/Wilkes-Barre area. When we arrived here this summer, she contacted one of these reporting services (Stacy works as a court reporter doing free-lance deposition work). This was okay, but not quite what she had hoped for. She contacted other reporting services and interviewed with the one with which she is now happily working. And she has had more work than ever in her life. Although the actual income itself is inconsistent, with God's help we are making ends meet. *"[He] is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us."* (Eph. 3:20)

Concerning our children. We believe that the Lord led us here at this time in our lives, not only for what Stacy and I want in our pursuit of God and His will, but also for the ultimate good of our children. God has wonderfully provided for each and every need that we have. The boys are doing well in their respective schools: Andrew (14), as a freshman at the local public high school; Daniel (13), as an 8<sup>th</sup> grader at the local middle school; David (12) also there as a 6<sup>th</sup> grader; and Benjamin (10), as a 5<sup>th</sup> grader at the local elementary school. [Of course, some families here choose to home-school their children; others send them to parochial schools. Whatever your convictions demand and your finances allow, you can find it here in Northeastern Pennsylvania.] Our sons have not lacked for all of those activities they enjoyed in San Diego, primarily sports. Since we have been here, David has become a Boy Scout, Daniel has completed a season of wrestling, David and Ben have been playing basketball, Andrew is taking advanced classes as well as assisting the computer teacher with the school's computer network. Although they haven't been to the ocean lately, they have been snow-boarding and skiing. The needs and interests of our children are being met in wonderful ways. *"He will feed His flock like a shepherd; He will gather the lambs with His arm, and carry them in His bosom, and gently lead those who are with young."* (Isa. 40:11)

I would like to emphasize the importance of carefully considering the needs of each and every family member, if you have a family, and are considering such a move. God will honor this commitment. Stacy and I have constantly desired and strove to maintain the integrity of our family while pursuing these studies. I think this is an important pastoral consideration. *"Know well the condition of your flocks."* (Prov. 27:23)

Concerning debt. We had built up some debt while living in San Diego, including a car payment. We would like to have paid all of this off first. We were tempted to use even this as an excuse not to come. We were also concerned about how to pay for tuition. However, thankfully we have been able to manage our debt and continue to make our payments. It's tight most of the time, but God faithfully provides. *"Seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness and all these things shall be yours as well."* (Mt. 6:33)

All of our concerns addressed. Houses, furniture, children, jobs, debt. What other obstacles or concerns could we have used as excuses not to come? God has wondrously met each and every need that we have. It requires our stewardship, resourcefulness, and contentment, as well as the generosity and prayers of others, but somehow God provides. With one and a half semesters completed, I know that with God all things are possible. *"Behold, I am the LORD, the God of all flesh; is anything too hard for me?"* (Jer. 32:27)

Why St. Tikhon's? The simple answer to this question is that this is where our bishop, His Grace Bishop Tikhon (Diocese of the West), recommended that we attend given our circumstances and needs. I know that other men from our diocese have attended other seminaries based on their needs (for example, the gentleman from Montana mentioned above is currently attending St. Vladimir's Seminary in New York). We trust that the Lord leads His people through his faithful hierarchy. We are here in obedience to the wisdom of our diocesan bishop. *"Obey your leaders and submit to them; for they are keeping watch over your souls..."* (Heb. 13:17)

Are we glad we chose St. Tikhon's? Absolutely! This has proven to be just the right place for me and my family. The academics are excellent and challenging without being overwhelming. The professors are outstanding in their respective fields of instruction: from dogmatics to history to patristics to Scripture to liturgics. Another wonderful dimension here is the monastic community of St. Tikhon's Monastery. It is truly a privilege to develop friendships with the monks. This has been a good influence on my children--the monks, the priests, the seminarians. The monks celebrate the full order of services providing ample opportunity for worship and service. My sons are able to serve at the Divine Liturgy each week if they desire. I also must mention in this context the wonderful archpastoral presence of His Eminence Archbishop Herman. As rector of the seminary, abbot of the monastery, and seminary professor, his loving care and wisdom are felt throughout. He is always kind to my wife and sons, lovingly encouraging us by his example, teaching and prayers. Also, I have to mention the beautiful small-town, country environment and scenery of Northeastern PA. This is the first time we have ever been able to enjoy all four seasons! *"Behold how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity!"* (Ps. 133:1)

Are we glad we moved? Well, so far, definitely yes. We believe this is God's will for our lives. Do we miss San Diego? Sometimes. Most of all we miss our friends at our home parish. Would we do it again? Without a doubt. Would we encourage others to come to St. Tikhon's? Without hesitation. The St. Tikhon's Seminary/Monastery community has exceeded our expectations. God is faithful. Each person or family is different and precious to the Lord. Our circumstances and needs may vary, but the Lord knows precisely what they are and will meet them if only we will trust Him, if only we will call upon His Name and step out and act in faith. He is faithful; His promises are sure. "I don't know what the future holds, but I know Who holds the future." *"All the promises of God are Yes in [Christ]. That is why we utter the Amen through Him to the glory of God."* (2 Cor. 1:20)

Some people may have a sense of God's calling from youth, but I think for most people it takes time. It is not something that we should be anxious about. Rather, by faithfully participating in the life of the church--serving there, giving there, worshipping there, growing there. God will make it clear. Talk with your priest. Talk with your spouse if you're married. Pray. And most of all, trust the Lord to guide you. He will. I think these things are important for every faithful Orthodox Christian, not just for men called to the holy priesthood. He has a

place of service for each and every one of us. We are all called to do His will, in the Church, in our homes, in our places of employment. He loves us so much and cares for us so faithfully and so generously. He gave us life. He sustains our lives. He gave His life for us and for our salvation. How can we not live our lives for Him? *"He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?"* (Rom. 8:32)

### **What can you do about Vocations?**

1. As A Person: Seek the Lord. Trust the Lord. Serve the Lord where you are. Faithfully participate in the life of the Church. With the blessing of your local parish priest, and the counsel of your bishop, begin the application process if you think God is calling you to the priestly ministry. If possible, attend a vocations retreat here at St. Tikhon's in the spring, or visit anytime that is convenient. Don't be anxious. Wait on the Lord. He will make your path straight. *"Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will direct your path."* (Prov. 3:5-6)
2. As A Parish: Please encourage prospective seminarians. Be creative. My home parish in San Diego, St. John of Damascus Orthodox Church, established and endowed a scholarship fund (the Bishop Boris (Geeza) Scholarship Fund), not just for seminarians, but also for faithful college students. Consider sponsoring a seminarian. My parish has been doing this for years. It has always been such an encouragement to the "adopted seminarian" and their families of which we are now one. Consider establishing a monthly offering for your adopted seminarian(s). My home parish does this. Their generous gifts always seem to arrive at just the right time. Pray for your adopted seminarians. Consider giving to the seminaries as a regular part of the parish budget. We could not have made it here if it were not for the faithful giving and prayers of our home parish. Their faithful monthly support and prayers truly sustain us. We are especially thankful for them and our home parish priest, the Very Rev. Fr. Alexander Federoff. We are eternally grateful! Thanks for everything, Fr. Alexander and our parish family at St. John's! We could not be here without you!
3. As A Priest: Please encourage young men who possess a sense of God's calling to pastoral ministry. Involve them in the life of the Church wherever you can--serving, singing, reading, teaching. Nurture and inspire these young men to follow the Lord as servants in His vineyard. Your words, your example, and your prayers are of inestimable value in inspiring future generations of servants for Christ's holy Church.
4. Everyone: Please pray for vocations. Please never underestimate the power of your prayers, and the intercession of all the Saints, for accomplishing God's will. We would not be here if it were not for the consistent prayers of God's faithful--hierarchs, priests, and parishioners. *"[The Lord] said to His disciples, 'The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Therefore beseech the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into His harvest.'" (Mt. 9:37-38)* But be careful, the Lord may answer this prayer through you! If we can do it with a family of six, I know that the Lord can make it possible for you!

*"Who is so great a God as our God? Thou art the God who does wonders!"  
"Behold, I am the LORD, the God of all flesh; is anything too hard for me?"*