

Near the center of Vienna, not far from the Belvedere Palace and the monument of the Soviet Soldier, the golden cupolas of the St. Nicolas Cathedral gleam. When the sun is shining, beams of light reflect from the facets of the cross in the colors of the rainbow. The beauty of the Orthodox cathedral speaks of a rich Russian ecclesiastical heritage that is greatly appreciated by Austrians and Russians. The cathedral is considered one of the most memorable sites in the Austrian capital. In 1998 the cathedral was granted the status of a historical and cultural monument of Russian heritage. What is more important than its beauty, however, is the fact that it offers a spiritual home for Orthodox Christians living in Austria. Parishioners of different nationalities attend the Holy Services. Among the faithful are Russians, Ukrainians, Belarusians, Georgians, Macedonians, Bulgarians, Austrians, Serbs and Moldovans. The parish also welcomes visitors from Germany, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia and Hungary. It is this miracle of attraction which has caused the cathedral to flourish in the 21st century.



History of the Cathedral

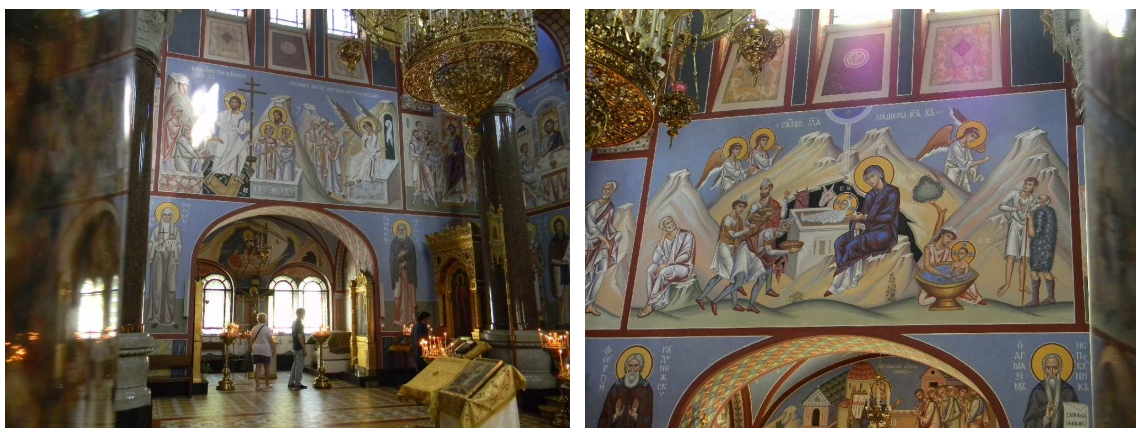
The Cathedral of St. Nicholas the Wonderworker in Vienna was erected in the 1890s. The idea of building the church came from Archpriest Michael Raevsky, then Rector of the Russian Embassy Church in Vienna. Fr. Michael began to collect donations for the construction of the new church, but was not able to witness its realization during his lifetime. As a result, the new rector of the church, Archpriest Alexander Nikolaevsky, presented to the Russian Ambassador Prince Lobanov-Rostov a report detailing the need for the construction of a new church. The Prince addressed the request to St. Petersburg and received a donation in the sum of 400,000 rubles. Of the total amount, Emperor Alexander III personally donated 200,000 rubles, and the other half was allocated by the government. The interior decoration and the vestry of the church were funded by private donations. The Russian Ambassador in Vienna, Prince Kapnist, donated the bells for the belfry.

A model for the church was created by architect I. Kotov, a member of the St. Petersburg Imperial Academy of Arts. The construction of the church began in 1893 and continued for the next six years under the supervision of two architects, V. Rumpelmayer and L. Giacomelli. In 1899, the upper level of the church was consecrated in honor of St. Nicholas, Archbishop of Myra, and the lower level in honor of St. Alexander Nevsky. The choice of these patron saints was quite symbolic: the construction of the church began during the reign of Emperor Alexander III and ended in the times of the last Russian Emperor, Nicholas II. Archpriest Alexander Nikolaevsky became the first Rector of St. Nicholas Church and served there until his death in 1913.

The First Republic and annexation

The church's subsequent destiny was not an easy one. In 1914, due to the outbreak of World War I, Russia and the Austro-Hungarian Empire ended up on opposite sides of the battlefield. The church was closed along with the Russian Embassy, and Spain, which was neutral at that time, was given guardianship of the buildings. The rector at that time, Archpriest Arseniy Rozhdestvensky, fled to Switzerland. In 1924, after the establishment of diplomatic relations between the USSR and Austria, the church and the embassy were returned to Soviet control. The church

transfer protocol of July 26, 1927, states that “the building has not been heated or ventilated over the past 13 years”. The Soviet government used the church building as a warehouse and its doors remained closed for services. In March 1938, Austria was occupied by the Nazi Reich. Diplomatic relations between the USSR and Austria were interrupted again. After the attack by Germany on the USSR, the Reich’s foreign policy department confiscated the real estate of the Soviet diplomatic mission in Vienna, including the church. On September 23, 1941, a part of the complex was transferred to the Imperial Musical School of the City of Vienna (today known as the University of Music and Performing Arts, Vienna), and another part was used as a hostel for Hitlerjugend members of school age. The church was used for dancing and music classes; an organ was installed in the place of the choir. The basement was used as a warehouse for valuable collections, as a scientific library of the Botanical Institute of the University of Vienna and, during World War II, as a bomb shelter.



Liberation

The church was re-opened in October 1945 by Archbishop Fotiy (Topiro), who arrived in Vienna after it was freed from Nazi occupation. The Most Reverent Alexander Vanchkov was appointed rector of the re-opened church, which was finally open for the faithful after 31 years (1914-1945) of turmoil. During these years, the building had deteriorated, and the church archives and many objects and sacred vessels had been lost. In the summer of 1946, Archbishop Sergiy Korolev and Archimandrite Arseniy Schilowsky were appointed to the parish. A major renovation of the building began with the active support of the Soviet Military Commandant’s Office, and in 1948 the new main bell was placed in the belfry. This bell has a commemorative inscription by the victorious Russian Army. Since then, the following rectors have served at the church: Archimandrite Arseniy Schilowsky (1950-1962), Archpriest Vitaliy Malyuzhkovich (1966-1970), Archpriest Viktor Bekarevich (1970-1979), Archpriest Evgeniy Misseiuk (1979-1982), Archpriest Pavel Krasnotsvetov (1982-1987), Archpriest Mikhail Turchin (1987-1997), and Archpriest Nikolay Orlov (1997-2002).

St. Nicolas Church becomes a Cathedral

Like the other ambassadorial churches, the church in Vienna was initially included in the organizational structure of the St. Petersburg diocese. An independent deanery was established in 1951 and later on, in November 1962, the independent Diocese of Vienna and Austria was created. As a result, St. Nicholas Church was granted the status of a cathedral. Since then, the Viennese diocese has been led by Bishop Varfolomey (Gondarovsky) (1964-1966), Bishop Melchisedek (Lebedev) (1967-1970), Bishop German (Timofeev) (1970-1974), Bishop Viktorin (Belyaev) (1974-1975), Metropolitan Irinej (Zuzemil) (1975-1999), and Archbishop Pavel (Ponomarev) (1999-2003).

Church Choir

During this post-war time, a magnificent choir under the direction of Professor Andrey Gnatyshina accompanied the Slavonic divine services in the church. In the 1960s, choir director Alexander Nechipor led a new choir. Some of the chants he created are still in use today. After his death in 1978, Reader Ivan Vasilevich Rumpel became the new choir director, and held this position for over 24 years until his death in 2002. He also published church chants and collected a significant musical library.

In 1997, His Holiness Patriarch Alexy of Moscow and All Russia visited Vienna and served the Divine Liturgy in the St. Nicholas Cathedral. His Holiness presented a commemorative icon of St. Nicholas to the church, and in his speech commented:

“I am touched when entering this church, which has spiritually united the Russian people in this city for over one hundred years”.

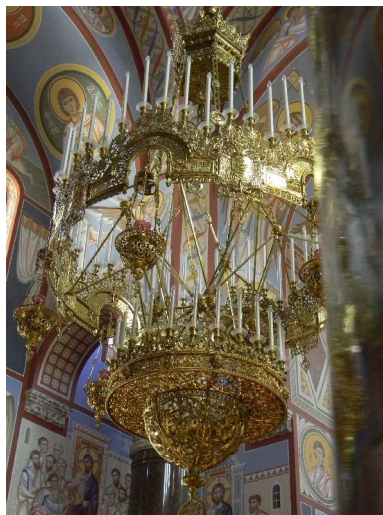
In 1999, the church celebrated the 100-year anniversary of its consecration. During this celebration, many official guests visited, including Moscow mayor Yuri Luzhkov. In honor of this anniversary, a gilded commemorative medal was produced. In May 2007, the President of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin, visited the cathedral. During negotiations with the Austrian government, Mr. Putin asked about the possibility for the Russian Orthodox Church to continue its activities throughout the territory of Austria.



Complete renovation

Many efforts have been made by bishops, priests, and parishioners to ensure the existence of the church until today. In 2003, a major renovation of the church was started. The Mayor's Office of the City of Vienna, Lukoil, Gas-export, and many private sponsors supported its restoration. This has allowed the cathedral to be fully renovated, and for the first time in its history its interior walls were decorated with frescoes.

Many icons have been collected throughout the church's lifetime; the earliest of these is that of St. Nicholas, which is dated to 1828. The icon "The Appearance of the Mother of God to St. Sergius of Radonezh" was written in 1899 at the Trinity-St. Sergius Monastery, Russia, and was donated to the church. The icon of St. Panteleimon, with relics of the Great Martyr and Healer, can be found in the lower church. Prayers to St. Panteleimon help cure people from illness. The icon of the Royal Martyrs – Tsar Nicholas II and his family – was blessed on their remains in a monastery in Yekaterinburg, Russia. The icon of St. Alexander Nevsky was presented to the cathedral by the Abbot of the Alexander Nevsky Monastery in St. Petersburg, Russia.



Exclusive Icons and Christian relics

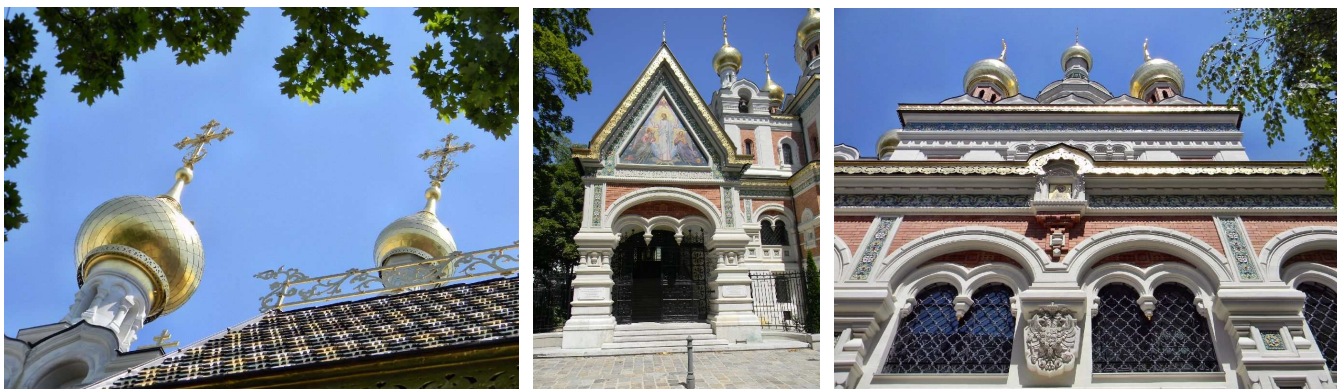
There are also copies in gilded frames of wonderworking icons of the Mother of God, who is especially venerated in Russia. Russia is known as the “Dominion of the Mother of God”. The icon of the Mother of God “The Deliveress” became famous due to miracles attributed to it in the Russian St. Panteleimon Monastery on Mount Athos, Greece. In 1889, this icon was presented to New-Athos/Simon the Canaanite Monastery in the Caucasus. The feast day of this icon is on October 30, in memory of the miraculous rescue of Emperor Alexander III and his family from a train accident. An inscription on the back of the icon says:

“Holy Mount Athos, April 17, 1903. This holy icon is an identical copy of the one on New Athos and is called the Mother of God ‘The Deliveress’. This icon was written and blessed on Mount Athos, and was sent by Russian Monks as a gift to Archpriest Nikolaevsky for the St. Nicholas Church at the Russian Imperial Mission in Vienna.” The icon of the Mother of God “Joy and Consolation” is known for having protected the Vatopedi Monastery on Mount Athos from pillage. The feast day of the icon is on February 3, in memory of this event.

The Vladimir icon of the Mother of God was recently written especially for the church. The icon has a relic container with a small particle of the Holy Virgin’s belt, a piece of her vestment, and a stone from her coffin. The feast days of this icon fall on May 21, June 23, and August 26, in honor of the Mother of God, who has protected Russia and her people many times.

Some of the church’s icons were displayed at an exhibition entitled “Icons under Hammer and Sickle: The Russian Orthodox Church in the 20th Century”, which was held in Vienna and organized by the Publishing Council of the Moscow Patriarchate.

The cathedral has a significant collection of Christian relics. In the upper level of the church, parishioners can venerate relics of St. Nicholas. There are also relics in the vestry, such as those of Ss. Peter and Paul, which were brought from Rome; relics of St. Martin, Bishop of Tours; of St. Alexander Nevsky, presented by the Abbot of the Alexander Nevsky Monastery in St. Petersburg, Russia; and of the Optina Elders, from the Optina Hermitage in Kozelsk in Russia’s Kaluga Region. There is also a relic of the Holy and Life-giving Cross from Venice, whence it was taken from Byzantium by crusaders.



Architecture

The Cathedral of St. Nicholas the Wonderworker in Vienna is a prime example of the neo-Russian architectural style. The central dome is based on a tent construction, and is topped by a five-meter cross with Russian Federation state symbols and sixteen crystal inlays. Four smaller golden cupolas surround the central dome. A fifth cupola is located above the belfry and crowned by a filigreed bejeweled cross. A white stone decorative border with Byzantine motifs is located at the base of each cupola. The cupolas and porch at the front entrance are covered by multi-colored enameled tiles.

The walls of the church are made from red brick and decorated by white stone details and brightly colored ceramic tiles. The edge of the copper roof is framed by an elegantly carved golden frieze. Windows in the lower part of the building are trimmed by a refined forged lattice. On the facade of the building, under a decorative border, a mosaic icon of St. Nicholas is featured.

A mosaic of Christ's Ascension can be seen on the pediment of the archbishop's porch, which has a wide stone stairway. This mosaic was made in Venice based on a model created by N. A. Bruni, a professor at the Imperial Academy of Arts.

Massive carved wooden doors lead to the upper level of the church. The height of the main cupola creates an atmosphere of open space inside. There are four grand monolithic columns supporting the main cupola, made from spotted red-black granite with carved capitals of light grey sandstone. Light shines into the church through stained glass windows in pastel colors inserted into lead frames. The magnificent candelabra, decorated with filigreed old Slavonic writing, was donated by Emperor Nicholas II. The upper level of the church is surrounded by a five-meter-wide gallery leading to the vestry.

The gilded two-story iconostasis of the church is built from cypress and based on a design by the church's architect, Academic I. Kotov. The iconostasis has an elaborate top edge, above which a carved cross rises. Seventeen icons in the Byzantine style were written on bronze boards by the artists N. A. Bruni and N. N. Kharlamov. Two large golden frames with icons of St. Nicholas and St. Alexander Nevsky are placed on each side of the iconostasis.

In addition to traditional icons, the Church of St. Nicholas is decorated by iconic stained-glass windows. Thus, on a landing leading to the church's upper level, such an icon of St. Nicholas welcomes parishioners, and images of Christ Pantocrator, the Mother of God, and St. John the Baptist are represented in three windows of the church.



Lower level Church

The lower level of the church is smaller than the upper level and has a modest, private character. The low arches on massive columns create a horizontal architectural proportion. The chapel on the left side was consecrated in honor of St. Martin, Bishop of Tours. A hexagonal baptismal font for adults was built in 2007. A new marble iconostasis was made in 2008, based on a model by Archimandrite Zinon. Classic motifs dominate the icons and architecture of the iconostasis, which is characterized by faultless proportions, accurate drawings and noble colors.

From 2003-2008 the church went through major renovation. Since the building was constructed in the 19th century all the wiring was replaced, and the structure was restored by hand and strengthened using thousands of kilograms of mortar and brick-work. The crosses and all six cupolas were re-gilded, the facade was cleaned and restored, the basement waterproofed, and the tiles on the roof restored. The tiles on the front of the church were re-made in Italy based on original samples. It took five months to restore the nine candelabras in the church. Brand new bells were cast and delivered from the city of Voronezh in the Russian Federation.

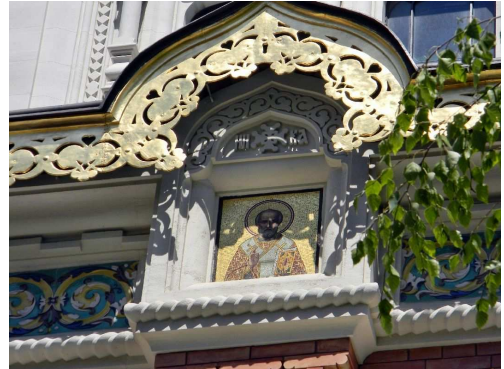
Wall painting

For the first time in its history, the interior of the cathedral was covered with frescoes – an undertaking that lasted two years (2006-2008). This work was executed by a team of iconographers led by archimandrite Zinon (Theodor), an outstanding contemporary icon painter who has also worked in monasteries and churches in Russia, Finland, Belgium, Italy, and Greece. The team included iconographers from Moscow - Alexander Mysyk, Vassily Sokolov, Eugeny Malyagin and Ilya Ivankin, as well as Yaroslav and Ioanna Yakimchuk from Poland.

A good example of the iconographic approach created by archimandrite Zinon is the composition "The Descent of the Holy Spirit on the Apostles", located inside the cupola and drum. In the center of the cupola dome is the *Hetoimasia* (Preparation of the Throne) - a symbolic depiction of the Holy Trinity. Rays of light descend down the drum's openings, crossed by the inscription "Behold, Thou hast sent down to us another Comforter, who is consubstantial with Thee, O Word, and seated on the same throne as Thy Father". The apostles are at the base of the drum and the people to be enlightened are depicted next to them.

The end of the apse features a large figure of Christ Pantocrator surrounded by symbols of the four Evangelists, which dominates the entire composition of the cathedral. This highlights the idea that the sending of the Holy Spirit and the birth of the Church were made possible by the Saviour's suffering and sacrifice of the Cross. The priests standing in the altar and the faithful praying in the cathedral find themselves in front of the Saviour, who looks down from above and unites God's people during their common prayer. In the altar are portrayed the prophets, hierarchs of the Church, and scenes from the story of Abraham that foreshadow the Eucharist, the principal sacrament of the Church.

On the eastern wall, at the base of the arches and above the columns, is a two-part composition entitled "The Annunciation of the Holy Virgin". It opens up the gallery of Gospel images that stretch around the inside of the cathedral in the second tier. These images are: "The Meeting of Mary and Elizabeth", "The Journey to Bethlehem", and "The Birth of Christ". One can see further on "The Meeting of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ", "The Epiphany", and "The Holy Transfiguration of Our Lord Jesus Christ". The northern side features "The Raising of Lazarus", "The Kiss of Judas", "The Crucifixion of the Saviour", "The Descent into Hell or the Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ", and "The Angel Appearing in front of the Myrrh-bearing Women". The lower tier contains "The Entry of Our Lord into Jerusalem" and "The Last Supper". "The Ascension of the Saviour" on the western side of the cathedral completes the story of the Incarnation of the Son of God and his earthly life. Above the western entrance is a traditional portrayal of "The Dormition of the Mother of God". The earthly life of Christ surrounds the people praying inside the cathedral, making them, as it were, witnesses of salvation and participants in the Kingdom of God.



Pastorship

At present four priests carry out their pastoral obediences at the cathedral: archpriest Vladimir Tyschuk – rector of the cathedral, archimandrite Georgij Vostrel, archpriest Chrysostomos Pijnenburg, and priest Radoslav Ristic. Two deacons also serve in the church: protodeacon Viktor Schilowsky and deacon Vasilij Bush. Together they are fluent in Russian, German, English, French, Dutch, Serbian and Japanese.

Service schedule

Services are held every week on Saturday evenings at 17:00 (the vigil), and on Sunday mornings, when two Divine Liturgies are celebrated: at 08:00 and at 10:00. Every Thursday, excepting Great Lent, a moleben (prayer service) is held, combined with an akathist to the cathedral's patron saint – St. Nicholas the Wonderworker. Schedules of services can be accessed at the cathedral's website at: <http://www.nikolsobor.org> or <http://russischekirche.at>

Each year more than 100 people receive the sacrament of Baptism. Confessions are heard on Saturdays during the evening service and on Sundays before the Divine Liturgy. During the Nativity Fast and Great Lent, the faithful may also receive the sacrament of Holy Unction.

With prior arrangement, all of the priests can perform the sacrament of matrimony, administer Holy Communion to the ill in a hospital or at home, hear confessions, or serve requiems for the deceased.

Prisons are also the focus of our pastoral concern. On request, the cathedral priests regularly hold services for prisoners.



Pilgrimage

Pilgrimages have also become an important part of parish life. The itineraries of these trips have been rather extensive, and have included the Holy Land, St. Catherine's Monastery on Mt. Sinai, Italy, France, and Lower Austria.

The aim of these pilgrimages is to acquaint their participants with Christian history, venerate sacred objects, pray, and renew the soul. In the course of these trips the faithful get to know each other better, share their joys and sorrows with each other, and learn to think of themselves in a new, more positive way.

In the Holy Land, pilgrims from the cathedral visited places connected with the earthly life of Jesus Christ and His Holy Mother, the Acts of Apostles and Epistles, and the courageous deeds of the Christian martyrs. Over the course of one week they experienced, as it were, the annual cycle of the twelve Great Feasts and the Gospel events, and joyfully exclaimed "Christ is risen from the dead" at the Lord's tomb.

The pilgrims have also visited Christian sacred sites throughout Europe. In Bari they venerated the relics of St. Nicholas, Archbishop of Myra. In Rome, as well as in the Holy Land, they came into contact with the very sources of their faith: the relics of Ss. Peter and Paul, St. Helen the Empress and Equal of the Apostles, a fragment of the Holy and Life-giving Cross, the chains of St. Peter, and many other sacred objects. They also visited the catacombs of the first Christians. In Venice they prayed at the tomb of the Apostle Mark, and venerated relics of St. Nicholas and St. Basil the Great.

In Paris they paid homage to St. Mary Magdalene, Equal of the Apostles, St. Martin the Merciful, Bishop of Tours, and the Crown of Thorns.

At Heiligenkreuz Monastery in Lower Austria, they venerated a fragment of the Life-giving Cross.

The St. Nicholas Cathedral in Vienna is also a well-known place of pilgrimage at Orthodox Christmas. Choirs from Belarus, Russia, Ukraine, and other countries have given concerts here. Finally, leading Russian theologians and historians regularly give lectures and answer questions from the audience.

Sunday School

In 1996 the St. Nicholas Cathedral's religious education school was opened with the blessing of Metropolitan Ireney (Susemil). Until 1999 there was only one group of children attending school. From 2000-2001 there were two groups, and in the 2002-2003 school year there were five groups. The teachers were selected from among the most qualified parishioners, who also had experience of working in public schools.

Due to the fact that many families in the parish are both German and Russian speaking, there was a need to organize a special group for German-speaking children. This group, taught by cathedral priest Father Chrysostomus Pijnenburg, is now the most numerous one.

Pre-school children are introduced to the main Orthodox feasts, as well as to the history and meaning of the icons of these holy days. Lessons are usually creative in character. For example, children illustrate biblical stories, make sculptures, and design various models.

It is noteworthy that many parents, who simply brought their children to classes earlier, now attend church services regularly. Classes begin two hours before the Saturday evening service.

Students in the advanced groups are approached in an entirely different manner. They enjoy looking for answers to biblical riddles, reading spiritual poems and stories, learning about the history of icons, listening to church singing, and studying the prayers read in church. Audio and video material is also used widely during lessons, and a vivid discussion usually follows these presentations.

As is known, all students in Austrian schools must take religious education classes; the only exception are pupils who have not declared the religion to which they belong. For this reason, each year each Orthodox pupil of the St. Nicholas Cathedral Sunday school receives a report card indicating his or her performance.

In addition to the regular classes, the pupils participate in Christmas and Easter plays, as well as in church singing. A children's choir accompanies liturgies for children, which are held twice a year.

Bible study

Special Bible study classes for adults are also organized at the cathedral. The parishioner who is to lead a particular lesson first carefully prepares her/himself by studying the material to be presented, and at the lesson reads the Gospel chapter by chapter. While doing so, he explains the passages and answers any questions that might be asked by the group.

The Holy Hierarch Philaret, Metropolitan of Moscow, wrote the following recommendations on how to study Holy Scripture: "Firstly, it should be read with devotion as God's Word, and with a prayer asking for understanding. Secondly, it should be read with a pure intention, in order to be guided in faith and do good deeds. Thirdly, it should be understood in accordance with the teaching of the Orthodox Church and the interpretation of the Holy Fathers".

The Bible is God's revelation of the Highest Truth. It is not enough for us to just read the Bible: the final aim is to react to God's Word, to apply it to ourselves and make all possible efforts to implement it.

Church holidays

The great church feast days are celebrated by the entire parish on the church premises. Adults meet in separate groups, and each year a Christmas tree celebration is organized for small children, with St. Nicholas, the Snow Maiden, dances, songs and presents. Excellent children's performances are also arranged by the students and teachers of the cathedral's Sunday school to celebrate Christmas and Easter.

The older pupils of the school have staged several performances, such as “Morozko”, “You are God, Who Works Wonders”, “Making Miracles”, “The Wise Tsar”, and “The Snow Queen”. The younger pupils have held musical performances such as “The Little Turnip” and “By Command of the Pike”. All the actions, music, dances, songs, dresses, and decorations were carefully prepared by the participants.

The cathedral’s youth theatre, headed by L. J. Serkina, debuted in 2005 with a musical and poetic performance devoted to Holy Week and Christ’s Resurrection. The following year young artists prepared a touching musical dedicated to Victory Day – May 9. In 2007 they performed “The Last Night of the Last Tsar” by Edvard Radzinski.

Trips and summer camps

Children have an innate interest in exploring and a thirst for adventure. Several times a year children from our parish go for day trips to the mountains – events which give them unforgettable memories and also teach them how to help others. The difficulty of the trips depends on the age of children and their training. For example, everyone from children to adults can attend the annual Cheese-fare Week outing, during which Sunday school is sometimes held. The alpine mountain treks, however, require that the children taking part in them possess safety skills.

Every May, children and their parents camp out in tents for 2-3 days outside of Vienna in a children’s camp called “The Blue Crab”. During these outings the comforts of civilization are forsaken for the romanticism of camp life, socializing, games and contests. The participants ask themselves: “What can we do now that we are far away from televisions and computers?” They learn that they can cook soup on an open fire, play football and volleyball, and take boat rides on a lake. In the evening, they sit around the fire together and sing songs to the guitar.

