

## **Protodeacon Simeon “Sam” Kopcha: “Good and Faithful Servant”**

*By Father John Hopko, Pastor, Saints Cyril and Methodius Orthodox Church, Terryville, CT*

Protodeacon Simeon “Sam” Kopcha was born on May 3, 1927, the fifth of the seven children of Matthew and Irene Kopcha, immigrants to the United States who self-identified as being of the Lemko people. The Lemkos were a Slavic people who for generations occupied the north slopes of the Carpathian Mountains in what is today southeastern Poland. (After the Second World War the Polish government dispersed the Lemko people, moving many of them under duress and against their will to the northern and western portions of Poland that had been newly gained from Germany in the land transactions that resulted from the War. Others were “repatriated” to the Ukraine.) At the time that Matthew and Irene came to the United States the Lemko homeland was part of the northeastern-most province of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the province of Galicia. The Lemkos themselves called their native region Lemkovyna. The Lemkos spoke an East Slavic language that most linguists today label as a dialect of Ukrainian, but which is also related to Byelorussian and Russian. The Lemkos who were literate used a version of the Cyrillic alphabet to read and write their language. The Lemkos were Eastern Christians of the Byzantine Rite.

When Matthew Kopcha arrived in the United States he told the authorities that his name was “Matvey,” which is, of course, Matthew in his native tongue. However, on his official documents this was inaccurately rendered as “Maftey,” and so, for the rest of his life (to the continuing amusement of his descendents), Matthew Kopcha was legally known by this flawed representation of his given name.

At the time of his birth and during his growing up, young Sam Kopcha’s family lived on a farm located off of South Eagle Street on the south side of Terryville, Connecticut. The farm was a subsistence operation, which helped the family live and eat. Sam’s father worked, as did many of his fellow immigrants, at the Eagle Lock Company, which at the time was the primary business and employer in town. Terryville itself sits in northwestern Connecticut at the crest of the hills that separate the Naugatuck River Valley to the west from the Farmington Valley to the east. When Sam was a boy this originally “Connecticut Yankee” town had been more recently enlarged through influxes of waves of immigrants from Canada and Europe including people of French Canadian, German, Italian, Polish, and Slavic background.

Sam’s mother, Irene, was a pious woman who raised her children strictly according to the tenets of her Eastern Christian Faith. Sam himself was baptized in what is today St. Michael’s Ukrainian Byzantine Catholic Church on Allen Street, Terryville; but, while Sam was still a young boy in the early 1930s, his family and many others transferred their membership to Saints Cyril and Methodius Russian Orthodox Greek Catholic Church on Fairview Avenue, Terryville (now known simply as Saints Cyril and Methodius

Orthodox Church). The reason for this transfer was that the people desired not just to follow the patterns of Eastern Christian worship, but truly to be part of the greater communion of Eastern Orthodox Churches.

Among the other young people at Saints Cyril and Methodius Orthodox Church was a young woman two years younger than Sam, Eva Hasko. Eva's mother, Martha, had been born in the United States, but her father, Harry (Gabriel), was an immigrant like Matthew and Irene Kopcha. Eva remembers Sam and his friends, Art Lyga and Harold Hasko, serving as altar boys, though Sam, on account of his musical talent, was soon deputized to the choir. Eva also remembers that Sam did not pay much attention to her, but that would change.

Sam attended the public schools in Terryville and was known for his musical talent, playing cello in the school orchestra. He also played some piano and tried his hand at the accordion. During his teenaged years, the world was engaged in the epic struggle that was the Second World War. Many young people from Terryville had entered into military service and in 1944, just after his seventeenth birthday and with his parents' permission, Sam left Terryville High School and enlisted in the United States Navy. Before he enlisted, Sam on occasion served as "best man" at weddings in Terryville, even though he was quite young, because the older boys were already mostly away in the service.

Sam served in the Pacific, spending most of his enlistment on the island of Okinawa packing up war materials in large crates to be shipped back home following the conclusion of the Pacific War in late summer 1945. While on Okinawa, Sam, whose pleasant singing voice had been noticed, sang with the Protestant Christian armed forces choir. When the Roman Catholic chaplain heard about this he was not pleased and wanted to see Sam, for the chaplain had the idea that Sam was a Catholic. Sam did his best to avoid that summons. Of course, when Sam served in the Navy in the mid-1940s, servicemen only had three choices to specify for their religious preference—Protestant, Catholic or Hebrew (Jewish)—so, as an Orthodox Christian, Sam faced a challenge in this regard. (Only after 1955 did the designation "Eastern Orthodox" become an option for specifying religious preference on military dog tags.)

Sam was noted during his lifetime for throwing himself "headlong," with wholehearted enthusiasm, into everything he did. On several occasions this was literally true, not always to Sam's greatest benefit. As a boy in Terryville he once dove into a farm pond and split his head open on a rock. His older brother (and lifelong close friend) Louis rode him down to the doctor in town on his bike's handlebars. At the doctor's Sam was told to bite on a wooden tongue depressor while the doctor stitched up the wound. When Sam got home, his mother spent the rest of the day alternately berating him for his carelessness and comforting him for his pain. A few decades later, attending the wedding of some friends (Jack and Donna Krinske) in Ohio, Sam would dive into the hotel pool and hit his head on the bottom, again requiring attention for the resulting wound. In between those events, while in the Navy in the Pacific, Sam once decided to jump off the ship on

which he was serving for a refreshing dip in the ocean. It was only once he was in the water that he realized why his fellow seamen were not joining him—there was a shark swimming about a bit too close for comfort. He hastily climbed back aboard the vessel.

Upon returning home from service in the Navy, Sam completed his General Equivalency Degree (G.E.D.) and then took some courses at Hilliard College (a precursor of what is now the University of Hartford). Initially he studied his first love, music, but then decided that engineering and business were, perhaps, for economic reasons, better choices. Eventually, Sam entered the workforce and, after a few other positions found himself as a salesman for Bicron Corporation and Quality Coils, Inc., both local manufacturing concerns that he would represent for years, until his retirement quite late in life.

During this time, Sam began courting Eva Hasko, who in later years would often note that early on, during their school years, Sam had never paid much attention to her, even though they had known each other from childhood and attended the same Church. Even once they did begin paying attention to each other, things did not always go quite as smoothly as they might have. In spring 1947 Eva thought it would be nice if Sam took her to her senior prom at Terryville High School, but Sam did not have enough money to afford the occasion so she went with someone else! Obviously that must not have derailed things, for eventually, on October 13, 1951, Sam and Eva were married at Saints Cyril and Methodius Church in Terryville where they had grown up together. By the time the decade was complete, they had four children—Susan, Claudia, Melanie and Peter. When Peter arrived, last of all, Sam was so used to having daughters that, when the attending doctor told him that Eva had given birth to a boy, he asked, “Are you sure?” The doctor, with a smile, offered to check again if that would please Sam.

Now a married man, working hard to support his family, it was at this time that Sam also fully immersed himself into his lifelong adult commitment to Saints Cyril and Methodius Church where, over the next nearly six decades, he would serve as a Parish Council Member, as Parish Treasurer, as Choir Member, as Choir Director (26 years) and as Deacon (23 years). It must be said, however, that Sam Kopcha’s commitment to his Orthodox Faith and to the Orthodox Church was much more than simply a list of positions occupied over the years—it was truly a consuming vocation of loving service.

There was evidence with Sam, even when he was a boy, that this would be the case. Of all her seven children, it was always Sam that Irene Kopcha was taking with her to Church. Then, as an adult, Sam was committed to the Church in a manner that even early on in his married life was clearly “above and beyond.” When Fr. George Pawlush, a young priest who had come to Terryville in 1953 soon after completing seminary, was transferring away from Terryville in 1959 and moving back to Eastern Pennsylvania to serve a parish there, Sam lent him his own new car so that Fr. George would have a reliable car to drive himself and his young family to his new assignment. Sam then drove Fr. George’s car

out to Pennsylvania to recover his own vehicle. Sam was also instrumental in the development of events and fundraising that led to the building of the Parish Community Center, which was completed in 1957.

Later, in the early and mid-1960s, when the parish had a series of priests who primarily spoke Russian and served in Church Slavonic, Sam was among the parish leaders who pushed for the use of the English language and who, each time a new priest was being assigned to the parish, requested the assignment of an English-speaking priest. He was among those who realized that if the parish built a new rectory the assignment to Terryville would be more attractive for a priest with a family and that this would be seen as a positive step for the parish. The Parish House was completed in 1969.

Sam became Choir Director in 1961 and, over the next twenty-six years, until 1987, he would diligently serve the parish in that capacity. When Sam began as Director in 1961, the worship services were still served almost exclusively in Church Slavonic. It was Sam who did almost all the necessary work to make the change to the use of English. This involved not only hours of work locally, but also participation in workshops and conferences and the attending of classes, all of which Sam embraced with enthusiasm. Sam also made himself available during house blessing season to accompany the parish priest on his rounds of the parish in order to drive and sing. On a volunteer basis, Sam did this every year from shortly after his taking on of the duties of Choir Director until well into his diaconate, when finally, after something like three and a half decades of this service, he was finally relieved of this duty.

One big step in the parish's history was the move from the Julian Calendar (the "old calendar") to the Revised Julian Calendar (the "new calendar"). After the Orthodox Church in America (OCA) came into being in 1970, emerging from its previous manifestation as the "Russian Metropolia," the parishes of the OCA, including those of the New England Diocese of which Saints Cyril and Methodius Church, Terryville, was a member, were encouraged to move to the use of the "new calendar." The big issue regarding this adjustment was that such a move meant that the Feast of the Nativity of our Lord would henceforth be celebrated on December 25 rather than on January 7. Many in Terryville (and elsewhere) were much attached to the January celebration of what had come to be known as "Russian Christmas." At the time, in the early 1970s, that the calendar change was being considered in Terryville, Sam's much beloved older brother, Louis "Lou" Kopcha, was President of the Parish Council. It was Lou, supported by Sam and other like-minded and forward-thinking members of the Terryville Parish who led the move to the "new calendar." In their minds this was a necessary part of being Orthodox in America. This was a difficult time in the parish and Deacon Sam was one of those who led the parish, not just by authority, but by good-willed example, through that period of transition.

A significant moment in the life of the Terryville parish and in Sam Kopcha's life, as well, came with the assignment of Fr. Michael Koblosh as pastor in 1977. Fr. Michael's pastorate was truly a high point in

the parish's life. During those dozen or so years, the parish transformed itself from a primarily ethnic enclave into a community that was making real efforts to witness to the universal quality of the Orthodox Christian Faith. The use of the Revised Julian ("new") Calendar was affirmed, the use of the English language for worship became the norm, education programs within the parish began to concentrate on truly Orthodox themes, and the financial support mechanism of the parish was shifted from a "dues" system to a system of true stewardship based on annual pledges of financial support made by the faithful members. This new system of financial support was accompanied by real development in the area of budgeting and planning. Also, the parish diaconate was renewed with the ordination of Deacon Paul Nimchek in 1980 and, later, Deacon Sam Kopcha in 1987. Perhaps most significantly of all, the new Church building was built in 1979.

Many were opposed to this last initiative, being very much attached to the original church building that had stood on the corner of Fairview and Ames Avenues since 1912, but Sam Kopcha was among those who not only whole-heartedly supported the initiative to take down the old church building (which truly was in need of either massive renovation or outright replacement), but who also worked extremely hard and was personally deeply generous in the efforts to take on, fund and complete that construction.

The decade following the building of the new Church was truly a "golden-age" in Terryville. The Church was full. On many occasions there were not one, but two choirs. The liturgical schedule was expanded to include (among other things) the full celebration of feasts and fasts (often including full vigils on eves of great feasts), weekday and Saturday evening services, the evening celebration of the Divine Liturgy of the Pre-Sanctified Gifts during Great Lent, a full week-long celebration of Holy Week, and the celebration as one continuous, unbroken unit of the annual midnight Paschal Nocturnes, Matins and Divine Liturgy. Most importantly, there was a renewal of Orthodox Christian Eucharistic piety among the faithful members of the parish, including frequent participation in the sacraments of Confession and Holy Communion. Until this time, for decades, many parishioners had only been participating in these saving sacraments once or twice a year and, even then, in somewhat perfunctory and dutiful manner, seen simply as the performance of an obligation, rather than as the taking advantage of a truly marvelous opportunity.

Sam Kopcha with his family, friends, and fellow parishioners embraced and responded with joy to these wonderful developments. Sam threw himself into Church work at this time, serving, of course as Choir Director, but also preparing himself with Fr. Michael Koblosh's guidance, for ordination to the diaconate, which took place on June 14, 1987 during the parish's 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations. Deacon Sam also involved himself beyond the borders of the parish. He was a regular participant in the extension program of lectures that took place yearly during the fall months at Holy Transfiguration Church, New Haven, Connecticut. He represented the parish at the annual Diocesan Assembly on many occasions. He

also represented the parish at the All American Council of the OCA, including at Montreal in 1977, when the first American-born, English-speaking Primate of the Church was elected. Sam also served as a particularly dedicated member of the Saint Vladimir's Seminary Theological Foundation, not only participating himself in the support of the Seminary, but also zealously encouraging others to do so, even visiting other parishes to ask for their support of the school.

In this regard, Sam was truly praiseworthy, all the days of his life. He supported his parish, the Connecticut Deanery, the Diocese of New England, the OCA, the seminaries, and so much more within the Church with incredibly generous personal financial gifts, to the point that his freewill support of the Church actually affected his own standard of living. He gave of his own material resources in a manner that was exemplary and self-sacrificial and this was not done for show, but rather with real commitment to the Biblical injunction that such things should be done in a manner whereby one “does not let the left hand know what the right hand does.” (Matthew 6:3)

All the while, Sam was enjoying his family, which he loved so deeply. Remembrances include family trips to Cape Cod in the summer, where Sam particularly enjoyed clamming and always enjoyed spending good times with the family. At home in Terryville, at the house at 47 Allen Street, which Sam and Eva had built on a corner of her family's property soon after their marriage and where Eva lives to this day, Sam put up a swimming pool in the back yard that was there for nearly three decades and which was enjoyed by three generations of Kopchas (and, even, the occasional group of visiting seminarians!). Sam and Eva watched their children grow up and marry and have families of their own. Over the years Sam and Eva welcomed eight grandchildren into their family—seven girls and one boy. Sam especially embraced the role of grandfather. His grandchildren affectionately called him “Papa,” and he responded to them with incredible depths of love, manifested especially by the careful and tolerant playing of children's games long after the other “grown-ups” had all run out of patience and energy.

Sam also enjoyed the personal contacts that he made. He was a great and bighearted friend. He had some close friends that he spoke with, personally or by telephone, almost every day—always with encouraging and uplifting words. Sam's sales area in his employment encompassed several regions in the state of Pennsylvania, including the areas around the cities of Pittsburgh and Erie in Western Pennsylvania and the well-known “Amish country” in Eastern Pennsylvania. On one of his trips to Erie, Sam visited the large “Old Believer” Orthodox Church there and became a lifelong friend of that community of Christians. When he visited Amish country Sam was always bringing back “care packages” of Amish baked goods and other food specialties for his family and friends in Connecticut. In later years, after her retirement from her work in the Plymouth (Terryville) Town Clerk's Office, Eva usually accompanied Sam on these Pennsylvania trips and sometimes they brought along family and friends, as well.

Throughout all of this, the truly defining aspect of Sam Kopcha's character was his unending commitment to labor on behalf of the Church. For Sam this labor was rooted in humble obedience to the Church and all that the Church asks of us; and this labor was fed by the very real joy that Sam received through his self-sacrificial work. Sam was a dutiful and respectful son of the Church. He lived out the saying of St. Cyprian of Carthage who famously wrote, "No one can have God as Father who does not have the Church as Mother." As one contemporary of Sam's put it, "When the Church asked Sam to jump, he asked, 'How high?' and then jumped higher than that, over and over again, tirelessly." Never did Sam think that he was being asked too much and, as a result, God always seemed to make sure that Sam had more to give and the time and energy with which to give it.

Sam's labors on behalf of the Church were usually of the humblest variety, for not only did he serve, consecutively, over the course of nearly six decades, as Parish Treasurer, Choir Director and Deacon, almost never missing a meeting or service, but Sam was also always at the parish church doing the thankless tasks that make parish life possible. Day after day, Sam was at the church, before work, after work, even when he should have been working at his own employment. He was particularly diligent in maintaining the beauty and cleanliness of the church building. He scrubbed out vigil and votive lamps, he maintained the liturgical vestments, hangings and covers, he polished the furniture, he cleaned the glass, he vacuumed the rugs, he took out the garbage, he scoured the bathrooms, he inventoried the necessary supplies and made sure they were never lacking. Sam baked the prosphora (Church bread), only with the best ingredients, carefully chosen. He bought the Eucharistic wine. When questioned about all this, he always said something like, "Just doing my job...now you go do yours," with a rare understanding and acceptance of the fact that such boundless commitment is, indeed, the calling of every Christian. He was "faithful in little." (Matthew 25:23)

This level of commitment also manifested itself in Sam's personal life of prayer and asceticism. In his own way, Sam was an ascetic. He always arose early in morning and, among his early morning activities, was physical exercise. For years, beginning in middle age, he was an avid road runner and, even into his latter years, he was devoted to various daily calisthenics, especially sit-ups. However, far more importantly, no one took more seriously the Church's calendar of feasts and fasts than did Sam. He kept the fasts meticulously and encouraged others to do so as well by his example. He said his prayers without fanfare, but with excellent regularity and devotion, and read the Holy Scriptures regularly. He participated appropriately in the sacraments of the Church. He embraced regular participation in the Sacrament of Confession and was always prepared to receive Holy Communion through prayer, fasting and assiduous involvement in the fullness of the Church's liturgical life. When confessing his sins, Sam was honest and

insightful. He knew himself and sought to better himself, while at the same time knowing that in Christ salvation was a gift received rather than earned.

It never occurred to Sam that there was another way. He never looked for a dispensation or a way around what he perceived of as the sacred obligations of Orthodox Christianity. This was especially true following his ordination to the diaconate. Once Deacon Sam was in a minor car accident that was not his fault and, after the necessary time was spent with the other motorist, whose fault the accident was, exchanging the necessary details of insurance and the like, the other driver said to Sam, “Sir, why are you not more upset? If I were you, I would be really mad.” Sam answered, “Well, I can’t be, you see. I am a deacon in the Church.”

None of this was done for show—indeed, Sam would have been horrified by the thought that he was doing anything for external reasons, that is, to be seen and noticed by others. When he sometime wondered aloud why fellow parishioners were not attending church regularly, or not supporting the church generously, or failing to keep the fasts and only showing up for the feasts, these were not questions he was asking out of judgment or with condemnation—no, this was not how Sam considered these things. Rather, Sam was genuinely perplexed at how people could willfully fail to love the Church by failing to respond to the obligations the Church places upon us. For Sam did not see the ways and means of the Orthodox Christian Church as merely obligations to be dutifully or even begrudgingly fulfilled, but rather as wonderful and blessed opportunities to be joyfully embraced and, even, enjoyed. In a way, it was Sam and those like him whom the Parish Council of Saints Cyril and Methodius Church had in mind when they wrote as the official Values Statement of the Parish these words:

*We are traditional: We value time-honored truths and morality. We hold to long-established patterns of worship, devotion and service. We value every person, family, and community. We believe that life lived rightly has boundaries—there are things that we should do and things we should not; but within the structure provided by those limits there is the opportunity for boundless growth, creativity and joy. Indeed, we affirm this apparent paradox: that the path to true freedom and eternal blessedness is to be a servant—to be a servant of God the Father, through Jesus Christ, in the Holy Spirit.*

Sam Kopcha taught us these values by his way of life and he lived them without ever even having to think about whether or not he should or could—he just did.

In the last years of his life, Sam Kopcha suffered profoundly. His body failed him. He developed chronic and progressive degeneration of the cerebellum, the portion of the human brain that, among other things, controls speech and balance. Eventually, he lost the ability to speak clearly, to communicate. At the same time, he lost the ability to walk, and he spent most of the last year of his life in a room in a



convalescent home he shared with three other men in similar circumstances. It seemed that in the last portion of his earthly sojourn, the Lord was requiring of Sam one more labor, the hardest of his life, and that was faithful contemplative stillness in the face of humanly impossible circumstances. Among the last times Sam spoke clearly was on Pascha morning, April 4, 2010, when he was brought Holy Communion for one of the last times before entering into more perfect communion with God through passage from this life to the next. Upon receiving the Holy Gifts that morning, clearly and with strength beyond what he was thought to possess by then, Sam said, “Amen. Amen. Amen.”

Twenty-six days later, on Friday, April 30, 2010, the Feast of the Apostle James, Brother of the Lord, God’s faithful servant, Protodeacon Simeon “Sam” Kopcha, surrounded by family and friends, fell asleep in the Lord. Immediately, at his bedside, a memorial service was served. The following Monday and Tuesday, May 3 and 4, the funeral took place, with all events taking place in the parish church at Saints Cyril and Methodius Church, Terryville, the location of so many of Sam’s labors. On Monday evening for the Memorial Service (the “Panikhida”) the church was as full and, perhaps, fuller than it had ever been. On Tuesday morning again the church was full. In honor of Deacon Sam, the choir never sounded better. It was truly an occasion that—though sad from a merely earthly viewpoint—from the perspective of eternity had a genuinely Paschal quality. It was Deacon Sam’s last earthly gift to the parish of Saints Cyril and Methodius Church, Terryville. The gift of a moment to remember, the gift of a moment by which to be reminded of and encouraged by the truth of the gospel that, indeed, “Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death” and that “unto us He has given eternal life, as we worship his third-day resurrection.”

Protodeacon Simeon “Sam” Kopcha is buried in the Parish Cemetery of Saints Cyril and Methodius Church, East Plymouth Road, Terryville, CT. The location of his grave is just to the north side of the large white cross that stands in the middle of the Cemetery. The Cemetery is open to those who may wish to visit Deacon Sam’s grave and pray there. “Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints!” (Psalm 116:15)