THE GREEK ORTHODOX CHURCH IN NORTH AMERICA

By Rev. J. Constantelos

The following are excerpts from a new book by Rev. D.J. Constantelos titled "Understanding the Greek Orthodox Church, its Faith, History and Practice", published by the Hellenic College Press, 50 Goddard Ave, Brookline, MA, 02146).

PART II

One of the Church's major problems was that she was without any bishops to coordinate the various communities and to direct the destiny of the Church. There was much individualism, disension, and lack of orientation. The 141 communities were like 141 ancient Greek city-states in an American archipelago. Some churches were social clubs rather than religious communities. To be sure, each congregation usually had its own priest, but priests were expected to administer the sacraments and conduct funerals rather than to lead the congregation, which usually was under the control of a lay board of trustees. The priest, often ill-educated, has come to America for the same purpose as his parishioners, and he was frequently at the mercy of the community, especially the board of trustees, which had appointed him. It has been rightly observed that in Greek parishes until 1922 "congregationalism reigned supreme in an episcopal church."

While undoubtedly many were concerned with the Church as the provider of spiritual and religious values, others were only traditionally Orthodox, attending the Liturgy on Christmas or Easter Sunday, or religious services conducted for some of their friends — a baptism, wedding, funeral, or memorial service. Church attendance was very poor. Nevertheless, it was due to zeal of certain dedicated laymen that most of the churches were established. For example, Holy Trinity Cathedral of New York, established in 1891, was the work of lay members of the Athena Society. They applied to the Holy Synod of Greece, which appointed Paisios Ferentinos the first priest of the New York cathedral. Services were held for several years in a hall or in a rented building until 1904, when the congregation was able to build its own structure at 153 East 72nd Street.

The way the New York cathedral was organized was more or less standard, and it served as the prototype for the establishment of later churches. First, a group of dedicated laymen would get together to determine whether there were enough Greek Orthodox to support a church. As soon as they secured the support of some fifty families, they would apply to the state for a charter of incorporation under titles such as Hellenic Eastern Orthodox Church of —— or Greek Orthodox Church of ——. The second step was to apply to the Ecumenical Patriarchate or to the Church of Greece, and sometimes to the Patriarchate of Alexandria, for a priest. The choice of the church to which the application for a priest was sent was often determined either by the political affiliation of the applicants or the place of their origin. Greeks from the mainland usually applied to the Holy Synod of Greece, while Greeks from Asia Minor, Thrace, and other regions usually directed their application to Constantinople.

As soon as a priest was available, the committee would seek to rent a hall or a church building, usually from the Episcopal Church. As a rule the congregation would move to its own building within a few years. Though the Church welcomed all Greek Orthodox, not all were supporting members. As already stated, the concern of many was to save enough to return to the motherland. Thus, though there were many Greek Orthodox, there were few churches and contributing members. This explains why the clergy were poorly paid and the churches in great debt and uncertain about their future.

A turning point in the history of the Church occurred in August of 1918, when the archbishop of Athens, Meletios Metaxakis, arrived in New York to study the problems of the Greek Orthodox in America. He was accompanied by Bishop Alexandratos, the titular bishop of Rodostolou (who later became Archbishop Alexander of America), by Archimandrite Chrysostom Papadopoulos (a renowned ecclesiastical historian who later became archbishop of Athens), and by a few laymen. Meletios Metaxakis was determined to bring order out of the chaotic conditions that prevailed in the Church. In the past, several requests had been sent to the mother churches for a bishop and for more concern for the church of the diaspora, but with no definite results. For example, the Greek consul general in New York City, Demetrios N. Botasis, in a report to the Greek government dated July 15, 1904, made a strong
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case to the Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs requesting its intervention with the Synod of the Church of Greece for the appointment of a bishop. But no bishop was sent.

The lack of initiative on the part of both the Church of Constantinople and the Church of Greece reveals what happens when a church is not a free institution or when it is tied to the state. Both churches were subject to the internal problems of their respective states, and both were prevented from acting by nonreligious considerations. The Church of Greece was divided between the loyalists and liberals, especially in the period of 1914 to 1918, and the good bishops had no time to devote to the problems of the immigrants. The Ecumenical Patriarchate was continuously under the threat of the sword of the Turks. When the Young Turks came to power in 1908, they were determined to expel all Christian minorities, including the historic Ecumenical Patriarchate. It was primarily because of the uncertainties caused by neo-Turkish nationalism that the Patriarchate could not concern itself with the problems of the American Church and issued, in March of 1908, the “no thanks” to manufacturers’ short term financing deals and apply any rebate to your down payment.

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