

## Divine Liturgy for Cheesefare Sunday Celebrated at St. Mark Church in Boca Raton



BOCA RATON, FL -

After the fruitful deliberations of the Holy Eparchial Synod, His Eminence Archbishop Elpidophoros of America, together with His Eminence Metropolitan Savas of Pittsburgh, and His Grace Bishop Athenagoras of Nazianzos celebrated the Divine Liturgy for Cheesefare Sunday at St. Mark Greek Orthodox Church in Boca Raton, FL on Sunday, March 17, 2024.

Everyone in attendance was spiritually nourished by the edifying words of His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew who in his Catechetical Homily at the Opening of Holy and Great Lent states that, "The Church constantly reminds us that salvation is not an individual, but an ecclesiastical event, a common discipline. During the God-guarded Holy and Great Lent, what becomes apparent for the spiritual life of the faithful is the definitive meaning of participation in the life of the community—that is to say, in the Christian family and parish, or else in the monastic coenobium. We would like to highlight the function of the Christian family as a community of life for the experience of Great Lent's spirituality. Our predecessor among the Saints, John Chrysostom, described the family as 'a small Church.' Indeed, it is in the family that occurs the rendering of our existence into

that of the church; it is there that the sense of the social and communal character of human life and the life in Christ as well as the love, mutual respect and solidarity are developed; and it is there that the life and joy of cohabitation are experienced as a divine gift."

At the conclusion of the Divine Services the presiding priest of the parish, Reverend Protopresbyter of the Ecumenical Throne Fr. Mark Leondis, welcomed Archbishop Elpidophoros and the hierarchs saying, "Your Eminence Archbishop Elpidophoros of America! This morning, I greet you with much love and joy in our Lord! I greet you as your spiritual son, one of your devoted priests, who is overjoyed at your Archpastoral visit, together with Metropolitan Savas of Pittsburgh, His Grace Bishop Athenagoras...The opportunity to host the Holy Eparchial Synod this week has been a true blessing for our St. Mark parish family. On behalf of the over 700 faithful families of Saint Mark, the esteemed retired Clergy who collectively represent over 250 years of service to our Church, our Parish Council, our Philoptochos, our Archons, we welcome you to your parish of Saint Mark the Evangelist, and we lovingly exclaim welcome home! ... Your Eminence, we have responded to your call for action — and lovingly present to you a token of our love and esteem for Your Eminence and one of the most important ministries of our Church, Hellenic College Holy Cross. It is where we develop, train, inspire men and women for service in the Church. Most importantly, it is where we educate priests to lead our parishes. Without a seminary, we have no priests. Without a priest, we have no one to serve our parishes.

This is the place where all the faithful priests in the altar nurtured their calling and faith and studied to become priests. This is a special place for us all...like a mother for us. This past year, Your Eminence blessed and appointed a new President, Dr. Demetrios Katos, to lead our beloved school. To honor Your Eminence's visit to Saint Mark and the appointment of its new President, it is only fitting we offer a gift to our beloved school. We humbly offer a \$20,000 gift to our beloved school for the new student technology center. We are honored to support Your Eminence's vision, our Archdiocese's vision, our School's vision. We love you and we thank you for leading our sacred Archdiocese with love, fervor, Christ-like offering of yourself, and dedication. *Eis polla eti despota!"*

Next Fr. Mark presented to the Archbishop a devout and faithful member of St. Mark Church, Archon Athanasios (Art) Poly. Art is a man who has spent his life serving the Church in many capacities over the last 30 years. Among many other things Art has been a member of the choir for over 50 years, and parish council president for 5 years. He also served on the building committee of the parish and

over the years he has chaired various fundraising events proving to be a leader in building up the endowment of the church as well as securing good order in the administrative and financial controls of the parish. Art has been a mentor to parish council presidents and has served as an advisor to the presiding priests of the parish. Fr. Mark noted that “there are few ‘churchmen’ like Archon Art Poly and thus on behalf of the entire parish, I respectfully request that Your Eminence offer Art a special blessing today.” The Archbishop then, with great joy and excitement, bestowed upon Archon Art the highest honor of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America – awarding him with the Archdiocesan Medal of St. Paul.

In responding to the warm welcome, Archbishop Elpidophoros thanked Fr. Mark and the entire community and commended them for their vibrant parish and their marvelous church structure. The Archbishop highlighted the synergy that this parish has with all generations from young to old and attributed its success to their building upon the firm foundation which was set by the earlier generations. The Archbishop then blessed the presence of the retired clergymen saying “we have here, as Fr. Mark said, the ‘retired priests’ these priests never retire. You know them by name and you know how strong they are; their generation is different – they never retire, they remain strong, active, inspiring, not only here in Boca Raton but throughout the United States! ... I want to thank these pillars of our church for their ministry over the years and it is only because of your ministry and your pastoral work that we can grow further into the second century of our Archdiocese.” The Archbishop also took the opportunity to acknowledge that a huge factor of the success of the ministry that Fr. Mark is able to offer is his Presvytera Anastasia and stated that “this wonderful couple and their wonderful Christian family inspire the lay leadership of this parish – all the men and women who serve on the parish council.”

The Archbishop offered his deep gratitude to the parish for their support of Hellenic College Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology and for their most generous donation made in his honor. The Archbishop made it very clear to all that Hellenic College and Holy Cross is the number one priority of our National Church. Most notably the Archbishop stated that “without clergy we will not be successful in our communities because it is the spiritual fathers of the parishes – it is not the Archbishop, the Metropolitans, the Bishops...you see us every now and again...it is Fr. Mark, it is the parish clergy, these are the heroes that keep our communities alive; not only the services, not only the sacraments, everything in a parish is around the ministry of our priests...There is no greater blessing for a family than to have a child who wants to become a clergyman..Therefore, my dear young men if you have any thought of becoming a priest, this thought is not yours it is God

knocking on the door of your heart - it is your calling...of course you can say no...but you can say YES and then your whole life will change; the entire community and your family will surely be blessed!"

Concluding his remarks the Archbishop stated, "I want us to remember today a very important person for you and for all of us, Metropolitan Alexios who celebrates his name day today. All of us prayed for his length of days, for his health, and his ministry in the Metropolis of Atlanta! God bless you all and Καλή Σαρακοστή!"

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