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Anamniseis Speaks with Treasurer of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America Elaine Allen



NEW YORK – The announcement of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America regarding a $3,000,000 investment in the newly constructed mixed-use building of the Saint Demetrios parish, including the purchase of 39% of the building, sparked numerous reactions and prompted a range of responses. Anamniseis communicated with senior advisor to His Eminence Archbishop Elpidophoros of America, Elaine Allen, who is also the Treasurer of the Archdiocese, in order to gather more information about the conditions and objectives of this unprecedented initiative and action for the Archdiocese, and her response was immediate. Mrs. Allen was not only willing to discuss the aforementioned investment but also addressed additional issues regarding the finances of the Archdiocese, the organizations, and the institutions that operate under its auspices.

Mrs. Allen is a distinguished certified public accountant, a former partner of Ernst & Young, and is regarded as an authority in the management of non-profit organizations in America and worldwide, given her approximately four decades of experience. We were impressed by her directness, the eloquence of her speech and primarily her willingness to address all our questions starting with what she described as the $3 million ‘investment’ in the newly constructed building of the Saint Demetrios parish.

Mrs. Allen emphasized that she has been personally involved for the past year and has her own perspective on the finances of the parish of Saint Demetrios of Astoria and the School. Most importantly, with the oversight from the Archdiocese, along with the collaboration of all parties involved, we have managed to produce a budget for the School that serves as a basis for its present and future financial stability. She also added that the Archdiocese has developed a comprehensive plan for the revitalization of Saint Demetrios and for the transformation of the School into an educational institution of excellence. This plan includes the appointment and assumption of duties of the Archiepiscopal Vicar of Saint Demetrios of Astoria by His Grace Bishop Athenagoras Nazianzos.

With respect to St. Dimitrios of Astoria, she noted that “this initiative itself and the measures implemented in restructuring the finances were overshadowed by significant misinformation.” Saint Demetrios stands not only as a stronghold of Hellenism and Orthodoxy, but also as the single community maintaining a comprehensive educational system from preschool through the 12th grade recognized both by Greece and the United States. The progress of the School, as was also pointed out by the Archbishop himself two weeks ago during the Agiasmos ceremony, constitutes a ‘big challenge’ for the Archdiocese and for the Archbishop himself, he emphasized.

The Investment

The Executive Committee of the Archdiocese reviewed the matter of St. Demetrios and decided to invest $3 million into the newly constructed multi-story building of the community in order to relieve the community of some of the burdensome loans and to provide to the School the necessary resources for its proper operation. Mrs. Allen stated: “As we have made it clear from the very beginning, I want to emphasize once again that this is not a loan but an investment in the newly constructed building and the future of the school and community. The community, as we all know, has two churches, three school buildings and the newly constructed building, which is for general use and is income-producing. This effort by the Archdiocese is aiding the community to repay its outstanding line of credit, while the rest of the funds will be allocated for the financial support of the School. Repaying the outstanding line of credit will allow the community to pay the debt service on the existing construction loan that will be converted to permanent financing. The remaining funds are to be allocated to the School and are not meant to be used by Saint Demetrios without the consent of the Archdiocese.

“Therefore, we are investing in the newly constructed building, aiming for any revenues generated from this building to be reinvested in the future of the School and of the Saint Demetrios community of Astoria itself. At the same time, we are examining the operational model of the community and the school in order to provide the school with the resources for ‘Aien Aristevein’ (to always strive for excellence) and to ensure well-paid remuneration for the teaching and support staff. Consequently, the $3 million sum constitutes an investment in the buildings, the schools and excellence in education.

“I feel compelled to emphasize, as stated during the recent General Assembly of the parish of Saint Demetrios of Astoria, that this investment will not yield any financial gains for the Archdiocese. Additionally, I would like to highlight that the

majority of the newly constructed building belongs to the community. At any given time, should the financial situation improve, the parish may repurchase the 39% sinterest owned by the Archdiocese, based on the fair market value of the property at that time.”

Finances of the Archdiocese

When asked about the finances of the Holy Archdiocese of America, Mrs. Elaine Allen stated: “Under the leadership of His Eminence Archbishop Elpidophoros of America, the Archdiocese has made significant progress in its financial management, and most importantly, has operated with balanced and positive budgets for the past six years. The revenues exceed the expenses, as the donations from the parishes and the faithful are allocated with consideration for theirdesignations and restrictions. When we receive donations for a specific purpose, the funds are earmarked and designated solely for that purpose. The funds contributed by the parishes on an annual basis are allocated for the proper functioning of the Archdiocese, the Metropolises and for the ministries. The Finance Committee, along with the Audit Committee and myself, are proud of the achievements made in the finances of the Archdiocese.

“In 2017, amidst the financial crisis, I was called to offer my expertise in the formation of the Audit Committee due to my professional background in finance and my engagement with non- profit organizations. I joined the efforts of Michael Psaros and the other Executive Committee members who were working to restore control over the deteriorating financial state of the Archdiocese. One of the first actions that we took was the formation of the Audit Committee, which addressed the situation by establishing a financial policies focused on the proper utilization of donations and the restoration of transparency and accountability. The policies that we adopted enabled us to regain the trust of the parishes and the faithful. I feel compelled to express once again my gratitude to Michael Psaros and to everyone who offered their services willingly to help navigate us through the crisis. And when we speak of the Holy Archdiocese, we are not referring solely to its headquarters on 79th Street in Manhattan; rather, we are including the Metropolises, the parishes, as well as the organizations and institutions of the Archdiocese.

“It is also worth mentioning that the aforementioned policies for proper administration, accountability, and transparency have been adopted by the Metropolises, the parishes, and the organizations and institutions of the Archdiocese. These policies and principles have been ratified by the Archdiocesan Council, the Holy Eparchial Synod, and the Clergy-Laity Congress, making the utilization of the offerings and donations from the community members a priority.

The Priorities

When asked about the progress of the key priorities of the Archdiocese, Mrs. Allen highlighted three main prioritiess: the Clergy Pension Fund, Hellenic College Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology in Boston, as well as the historic Saint Nicholas Greek Orthodox Church and National Shrine at Ground Zero.

The Clergy Pension Fund

Reporting on the Clergy Pension Fund, Mrs. Allen stated: “The Clergy Pension Fund has been stabilized. We have adopted and enforced a plan for its restructuring and financial stability. With the help of experts, we established funding policies which we implemented, and the performance of the Clergy Pension Fund began to exceed the budgetary provisions. Currently, all parishes participate in this program for the support of the Clergy Pension Fund. We implemented a system more equitable and financially viable than the past and we can finally reassure the parishes and the faithful that the foundations of the Pension Fund are stronger than ever.”

Hellenic College Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology

Regarding HCHC, Mrs. Allen stated: “The second significant area we focused on and continue to direct our attention to is Hellenic College Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology in Boston. Regardless of what has been circulated or written in the media and social networks, the situation in the College and in the School of Theology has changed drastically. The accreditation of the School has been secured for a decade. Trust me, I was present, and I can attest firsthand to the challenges that were faced in renewing these accreditations. We had to demonstrate to the accreditation agencies that we have developed and are implementing an advanced academic and financial plan. The financial plan included the Archdiocese committing support of HCHC for five years. This plan enabled both the College and the School to progress and provide students and academic personnel with all the necessary resources for their studies.

“When I first assumed my duties in 2017, HCHC was operating with debt of

approximately $20 million including various unfulfilled obligations to third parties. Today, the debt has been reduced to $5 million. Over the past seven years, it has decreased by $15 million. This achievement is primarily due to the leadership and determination of the Archbishop, who has guided the College and the School on a positive course. We should keep in mind that the smaller colleges and schools of theology are struggling, while several seminaries and the schools on the East Coast of the United States have already been closed. The biggest challenge, as well as the long-term goal, is to meet the academic and financial standards that we have set. In this ongoing effort, the contributions of the Metropolises, the parishes, and all the organizations of the diaspora are crucial. I state this emphatically because without our Hellenic College and our own School of Theology, the future of the Greek Orthodox Church is at stake. This is because it is not only the clergy that emerge from their ranks, but also the lay leaders who will staff the ministries of the Archdiocese and the communities themselves.

“To achieve these goals, HCHC has initiated a financial strategy that not only ensures its viability but also facilitates its transformation into an advanced School of Theology with global reach. We should not forget that with the closure of the Halki School of Theology and Turkey’s refusal to permit its reopening, the Holy Cross School of Theology is now the only institution exclusively under the auspices and supervision of the Ecumenical Patriarchate. This, at the very least, increases the responsibilities, not only of the Archdiocese and the parishes, but also of every Greek Orthodox American.”

Saint Nicholas Greek Orthodox Church and National Shrine

Mrs. Allen continued with the third priority stating: “The third and last priority remaining is Saint Nicholas Greek Orthodox Church and National Shrine located at the World Trade Center in New York City, which despite numerous challenges, has now been successfully completed. Saint Nicholas Church was consecrated and has since become a key attraction, not only for the Greek diaspora and Orthodox Christians but for all visitors to Ground Zero, as we commonly refer to the former Twin Towers, which on that tragic day of September 11, 2001, became a site of sacrifice for the nearly three thousand of our fellow citizens. The Archdiocese is committed to providing the necessary resources for the proper operation of Saint Nicholas Church and Shrine. This support will continue until the church attains its financial independence.”

Mrs. Allen continued, stating: “The three mentioned priorities on which we have focused our attention drain resources from the Archdiocese of America, while also limiting opportunities to develop new programs and expand ministries. It is obvious

that we cannot achieve all this solely through the contributions made by the communities which are estimated at $26 million, while the annual budget is projected to be $35 million, meaning that for every three dollars spent, two dollars come from the contributions of the communities. We must therefore obtain an additional $9-10 million each year. As an Archdiocese, we do not have a fundraising department, and all efforts are achieved with the existing personnel and the assistance of dedicated volunteers."

"Thanks to the financial assistance of Leadership 100, the Stavros Niarchos Foundation, the Bouras Foundation, and the Lilly Endowment (an American fund focused mainly on educational and religious initiatives), along with the support of our devoted community, we have succeeded in maintaining balanced budgets for the past six years."

When asked about the goals for funding the Archdiocese's ministries, Mrs. Elaine Allen pointed out that significant efforts are being made to diversify the financial resources. The aim is to ensure that the finances are not reliant on just one or two sources, but rather on as many as possible. "Securing the financial stability of our Holy Archdiocese allows us to direct our attention to other institutions, including Saint Basil Academy, St. Michael's Home, and the community of Saint Demetrios of Astoria," she emphasized.

Grant Awarded to the Center for Family Care

Mrs. Elaine Allen revealed that the Center for Family Care, one of the most noteworthy and innovative ministries of the Archdiocese, received a large grant from the Lilly Endowment. This grant will assist communities that currently maintain or wish to establish programs for

children with disabilities and their families. When asked about the amount of the donation, she responded that a $1.25 million donation for the next five years has already been received, which will be allocated to support a pilot program involving twelve communities. This grant will allow us to further outreach in our communities to those in need. As you may know, as another demonstration of outreach, the Archdiocese has already established missions to African American and Hispanic communities and has made a systematic effort to ensure that the necessary resources for the operation of this missionary work are in place.

Financial Stability

When called to make a prediction regarding the future, Mrs. Elaine Allen said: "The Archdiocese is going through a period of financial stability and liquidity. One

example are our investment portfolios allocated for scholarships. This year, we provided $300,000 in scholarships for college and graduate studies to students needing financial assistance. The Archdiocese also made grants and use of its own line of credit to provide a loan thereby supporting St. Michael's Home in completing the construction of the new facility in Uniondale, Long Island. We invite everyone from the Greek-American community and the broader readership of 'Anamneseis' to visit the website of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America to review the financial statements for each quarter and fiscal year. This will allow them to see for themselves that the Archdiocese has a solid financial foundation and, most importantly, operates within a balanced budget.

"Lastly, I would like to remind our devoted and generous faithful that the Archdiocese of America is one of the few, if not the only, non-profit organizations in America where every dollar donated is used solely for the particular purpose it was donated for. Needless to say, the Archdiocese has not spent a single dollar from the fundraising it has conducted over the past seven years on expenses that are not in accordance with donors' wishes and it will continue to honor donors' intentions," concluded the Treasurer of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America.

Photo: Dimitris Tsakas.

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