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Metropolitan Nathanael of Chicago Speaks About the Sale of Holy Trinity



Metropolitan Nathanael of Chicago, in an exclusive interview with *The National Herald*, discussed the recent sale of the nave of the historic parish of Holy Trinity of Chicago. He also gave his reasons for not informing His Eminence Archbishop Elpidophoros about the sale and spoke about the crying icon of the Mother of God, the audit of the finances of the Metropolis, and why the Holy Trinity parish continues to have two salaried priests given its financial troubles. The entire interview follows:

TNH: Your Eminence how do you feel about the sale of the Holy Trinity parish and its buildings in Chicago?

Metropolitan Nathanael: The recent sale of the properties of Holy Trinity, including the temple (ναός/naos), has been difficult for both the parish and the Metropolis. I especially feel terrible for the elderly parishioners and those who have recently

joined the parish and do not have a full understanding of the complexity and longstanding problems facing the parish. As I lament at the current situation, I draw hope in the words of Saint Gregory the Theologian, who advises Christians to “always look forward.” Although the buildings of the parish have been sold, the parish of Holy Trinity continues through its people. The Metropolis will work with the faithful to ensure they find a new spiritual home.”

TNH: How did things end up at this point? Couldn't this have been prevented?

M.N: As we stated in numerous public announcements, the parish was carrying a tremendous debt for loans it took out in 2007. The parish owed the bank over \$7 Million, an amount that exceeds the combined \$4,150,000 sale price for the real estate owned by the parish. As we have reminded the faithful in the past, the loan was obtained from a bank in 2007 and fell into foreclosure in 2015. You can understand that for a community whose membership has been steadily declining for years and is largely comprised of elderly people living off of a very fixed income, it is virtually impossible for the parish to fulfill its debt service. There were numerous efforts, both by the parish and by me personally, to try to identify ways to raise the money. Unfortunately, the funds needed to avoid the sale of the properties could not be raised.”



TNH: As Metropolitan what did you do all these months for the parish to saved?

M.N: Regarding efforts to avoid the sale of the parish properties, I am afraid that

the issue was one of fundraising. I not only discussed this with the parish council on numerous occasions, but I also discussed this during a General Assembly of the community. I also met privately with potential donors to determine if they would consider making a major gift. Unfortunately, there wasn't enough interest on either the grassroots or major gift levels. Before moving on, however, I would like to make something abundantly clear: the community has not been lost and the parish has not closed. Even though the parish has sold its properties in order to pay down its debt, the community continues to exist through its people. Indeed, during these difficult times, many people have rallied behind the parish. Parishioners who have remained on the sidelines for years have realized that they too are part of the community and have a responsibility to help continue the legacy of Holy Trinity beyond the present moment."

TNH: You begin your archpastorship as Metropolitan of Chicago at the time of the sale the most historic church in the Metropolis. What are your thoughts?

M.N: Holy Trinity's challenges have been building for several years. I have been the Metropolitan of Chicago for a little over a year and a half. I have been open and honest about the condition of our Metropolis. With full transparency, we have issued multiple public announcements outlining the many challenges we face as a Metropolis, and we did so because we believe that only when the faithful possess such information can they actually understand the importance of their contribution and service. The people of the Metropolis have known about the challenges facing Holy Trinity since at least 2015 with the filing of the foreclosure case by the bank, but there wasn't enough time or interest in retaining the parish's properties. As I said above, it is painful to have to sell a temple (ναός/naos); however, conversations with people in the Chicago area have consistently led me conclude that with proper planning and appropriate parish leadership, people will step up and provide Holy Trinity the means to begin the next chapter of its history. One of the most important lessons to be drawn from the Holy Trinity experience is the need for all of our parishes to be financially self-sustaining. At my direction, the Metropolis is working to help develop processes to evaluate and shore up parishes that are struggling financially."

TNH: How many families does the Holy Trinity parish have today?

M.N: Given that the faithful oftentimes are members in multiple parishes (sometimes across multiple States), it is difficult to have an accurate picture of the number of parishioners of Holy Trinity. At the most recent General Assembly meeting of the parish, which I attended on June 2, 2019, there were only approximately 45 members present, which were not enough for a quorum.”



TNH: Given the withering of the parish why is it sustaining two salaried priests, Fr. George Kaloudis and Fr. Nicholas Jonas? Can't just one of them serve its needs?

M.N: You have asked me this question in the past and I promised you that I would look into it. I am grateful for your patience. We have recently identified a letter (dated June 15, 2017) from the Metropolis to the parish which outlines the most recent terms of employment of Fr. George. The parish was expected to provide Fr. George a reduced salary until July 2019. At the end of this period, the parish was to determine if these terms were feasible according to its condition and needs. The Parish Council President and Fr. Nicholas Jonas have addressed this matter with us during our most recent meeting at the Metropolis. Given the condition of the community, there does not appear to be a need for two salaried priests moving forward.”

TNH: Are there other parishes in your area which face serious financial problems?

M.N: Your many years of covering ecclesiastical matters have revealed to you the challenges facing parishes all over the country. Indeed, our people make immense sacrifices on a daily basis to continue bearing witness to Christ in the world. Conversations with brother Metropolitans from other parts of the world have introduced me to the many challenges faced by parishes beyond the United States. These exchanges with other Hierarchs have instilled in me an ever-greater admiration and respect for the faithful of the Church. Although the Holy Trinity case is quite unique, I am committed to helping all of our parishes work through their financial challenges no matter how great or small.

TNH: What is going on with the crying icon? Does the Virgin Mary continue to cry?

M.N: As the Metropolis reported in its statement on September 10, an employee of the Holy Trinity parish reported that they observed what seemed to be tears coming down the icon of the Panagia on the iconostasis. Following that original report, nothing similar has been observed. We have asked the parish for temporary guardianship of the icon so that we may dedicate some quiet time to prayer, review, and discernment. The parish accepted our request, and on Monday morning September 16, Fr. Nicholas Jonas voluntarily brought the icon to our Cathedral.

TNH: Did you inform Archbishop Elpidophoros of America about the developments at the church and also about the crying icon?

M.N: His Eminence Archbishop Elpidophoros is a dear brother of mine and it was a great joy for me, as a member of the Holy and Sacred Synod of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, to vote for him as Archbishop of America. His Eminence's mission is great, and his burden is heavy. Knowing the many serious matters that are the direct responsibility of His Eminence, it is not appropriate for the Archbishop to be inundated with matters of individual parishes, at least not of parishes in another Metropolis. Notwithstanding this, the Metropolis of Chicago has been communicating with His Eminence's legal advisors and has kept them abreast of the legal proceedings. The Archdiocese has in turn provided our legal team with feedback, which explicitly tells me that His Eminence is aware of the proceedings. Regarding direct communication between His Eminence and I, please forgive me, but I do not feel it is appropriate to disclose conversations between two hierarchs.

TNH: Why have you forbidden Fr. Nicholas Jonas to make statements to the press?

M.N: When you read some of the recent statements made by Fr. Nicholas, I think you will understand why he was asked to avoid making statements to the press.

TNH: How would you comment on the findings of the financial audit at the Metropolis of Chicago?

M.N: I have issued two extensive announcements regarding the financial condition of the Metropolis, the first on June 11, 2019 concerning the financial condition of Metropolis and the second on August 6, 2019 concerning the independent financial audit. If you haven't already, I strongly encourage you to read these documents. I don't have much more to say about this.

TNH: Are there individuals who are responsible for the financial condition of the Metropolis before you assumed your duties there, and who are they?

M.N: I started this interview by referencing St. Gregory the Theologian and his advice for Christians to "always look forward." I would like to close our conversation today with the same words. Who is responsible for the past is anyone's guess and, quite frankly, is a backward-looking distraction that does nothing to improve our current situation. When I was enthroned, I pledged to institute an era of financial transparency and accountability, a pledge I still take seriously today.

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- Source: thenationalherald.com