

01/10/2019

## **Tarpon Springs Welcomes Home Archbishop Nikitas**



The Florida Gulf Coast city of Tarpon Springs in many ways resembles a Greek island, containing the highest per capita population of Greeks in the United States, and well-known for its Greek tavernas and gift shops along its historic Sponge Docks on Dodecanese Boulevard, where the Anclote River is adorned with sponge boats. It is also the site of the annual Theophany celebration and cross dive at its Spring Bayou, earning it the nickname “Epiphany City.”

It was at that cross dive on January 6, 1974 that then-Archbishop Iakovos tossed the traditional wooden cross into the Bayou, as a group of eager young divers swarmed to retrieve it. After much searching, no one emerged with it, prompting Iakovos to toss his golden cross into the water. This time, a young man swam to the surface with the archbishop’s golden cross in hand. That young man – a freshman at the University of Florida at the time – was Nikitas Lulias. This past summer, 45 years later, he was enthroned Archbishop of Thyateira (modernly the Turkish city of Akhisar) and Great Britain.

The native Tarpon boy was welcomed home, where he presided over Sunday Liturgy at the St. Nicholas Cathedral on September 29, followed by a reception

honoring him at City Hall on September 30. Speaking at City Hall, Nikitas emphasized the challenge to improve the human condition into which one is born and thrust. Whether a religious leader, elected official, or other member of society, “it is our responsibility to make the world a better place than we found it when we entered it,” and “to promote to make the world a better place,” he said.

He also spoke lovingly of his hometown Tarpon Springs, about how friends and neighbors were synonymous with family, and how he hopes that at some point, some locale within his archdiocese will become a sister city to Tarpon Springs.

Tarpon Mayor Chris Alahouzos served as Emcee, and welcomed notables Congressman Gus Bilirakis (R-FL), Bishop Sebastian, who represents Metropolitan Alexios of Atlanta, and Greek Consul General – Tampa (FL), Dimitrios Sparos. They all spoke fondly and glowingly of both the archbishop and the Greek community in the Tarpon Springs and greater Tampa area.

Nikitas told TNH that the main difference between Greek Orthodoxy in the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States is the stage of growth and development in which the respective faithful find themselves. There are no dioceses with metropolitans in the UK , he said, much like the Archdiocese in the United States under Iakovos. He also issued a message to TNH readers that “I have received many congratulatory messages from so many Greek-Americans and I am so grateful for all of them.”

Congressman Bilirakis said that during that Epiphany celebration when Nikitas retrieved the cross, he was an altar boy. He grew up with Nikitas, who is a few years older, and he confirms the archbishop’s love for his hometown. “You can take the boy out of Tarpon, but you can’t take Tarpon out of the boy,” Bilirakis said.

Mayor Alahouzos told TNH that he grew up with Nikitas and his brother John in Tarpon Springs, and that it is an honor and a privilege to welcome his old friend back to their beloved city, as an archbishop.

- Source: [thenationalherald.com](http://thenationalherald.com)