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Archbishop Elpidophoros leads Greek Independence Day celebration at New York State Capitol



Greek American legislators honor five community leaders as His Eminence delivers invocations for both chambers of the Legislature; retiring Senator Michael Gianaris hailed as a trailblazer

ALBANY, N.Y. — His Eminence Archbishop Elpidophoros of America spent a full day at the New York State Capitol on Tuesday, March 11, delivering invocations before both chambers of the Legislature, meeting with Governor Kathy Hochul and Senate Majority Leader Andrea Stewart-Cousins, and presiding over a midday reception at which Greek American lawmakers honored five members of the community for their service — all in observance of the 205th anniversary of the Greek War of Independence.

The annual celebration, organized by the Greek American members of the New York State Legislature, has grown into one of the most prominent civic expressions of Hellenism in the state, drawing elected officials from both parties, diplomats, and community leaders to the ornate halls of the Capitol building in the state capital.



His Eminence Archbishop Elpidophoros, Senator Andrew Gounardes, Senator James Skoufis, Assemblymember Michael Tannousis and Assemblymember John Lemondes, Jr. speak at the New York State Capitol. Photo by Orthodox Observer/Stratos Safioleas

This year’s events carried added significance: they took place in the 250th year of the American Declaration of Independence, a historical parallel that the Archbishop invoked repeatedly throughout the day, drawing a direct line between the revolutionary ideals of 1776 and the Greek uprising that began on March 25, 1821.

Received by the Governor and Senate Leadership

Archbishop Elpidophoros arrived at the Capitol, received by staff and officials, before meeting with Senate Majority Leader Andrea Stewart-Cousins, the President Pro Tempore of the Senate and the first woman to hold that position in New York

history.

His Eminence also met with Governor Hochul, continuing a tradition of engagement between the Archdiocese and the state's highest office.

Invocations Before the Assembly and Senate

His Eminence opened the session of the New York State Assembly with an invocation from the chamber floor. He gave thanks for the blessings bestowed upon the Assembly and asked for God's beneficence upon its members, noting that the ceremony was taking place as the United States marked 250 years since its founding. He also gave thanks for the Legislature's recognition of the Greek War of Independence, whose heroes, he said, were inspired by the heroes of 1776.

In the afternoon, the Archbishop delivered a second invocation before the New York State Senate. He prayed that the lawmakers would fulfill their duties with "honor, integrity, and unalloyed allegiance to the Constitution," and called upon them to love liberty — the same freedom commemorated on March 25, the Day of Greek Independence, and the freedom enshrined in the United States, now in its 250th year.

Both chambers formally recognized the occasion, an annual gesture of respect for the Greek American community and its contributions to the state.

A Festive Reception and Five Honorees

The day's centerpiece — a festive luncheon and reception was hosted by the five Greek American members of the Legislature: Senators Michael Gianaris, Andrew Gounardes, and James Skoufis, and Assemblymembers Michael Tannousis and John Lemondes, Jr. Also present were the Consul General of Greece in New York, Iphigenia Kanara, and the Consul General of Cyprus in New York, Kyriakos Pogiatzis, who each offered brief remarks.

In his remarks at the reception, Archbishop Elpidophoros placed the celebration in broad historical context, noting that it fell in the 250th year of the American Declaration of Independence. He paid tribute to the heroes of 1821 and called on those present to be worthy of their legacy. He also addressed the ongoing situation in Cyprus, affirming solidarity with its people and noting the dangers posed by the island's proximity to the unstable Middle East. "We pray for peace for all people," the Archbishop said, "for violence can never be the final resolution to other violence."

His Eminence expressed pride in the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America's headquarters in New York City and in the Saint Nicholas National Shrine at Ground Zero, which he described as a beacon of hope and resilience. Looking ahead, he noted that on April 26 the community would march up Fifth Avenue in the annual Greek Independence Day Parade — the largest of its kind in the United States.

As is tradition, each of the five Greek American legislators presented a New York State proclamation to a community member of their choosing. Senator Gounardes, who served as the principal organizer of the luncheon, introduced each of his colleagues in turn.

Nick Katsoris — Presented by Senator Michael Gianaris

Senator Gianaris honored Nick Katsoris, a New York attorney turned children's book author and philanthropist who is the founder and Executive Director of the Loukoumi Make A Difference Foundation. What began as a self-published picture book in 2003, inspired by the birth of Katsoris's son and named after the iconic Greek candy, has grown into a nonprofit organization that unites more than 150,000 children in 30 countries. The foundation's Good Deed Curriculum is now taught in more than 350 schools worldwide, and its programs include a treatment room at St. Jude Children's Research Hospital and a teaching kitchen for the homeless at the Floating Hospital in New York City.

Introducing Katsoris, whom he described as a longtime family friend and godfather to his nephew, Gianaris said the Loukoumi books had become a staple in his own home. "If you haven't seen the Loukoumi books, you should — they are really impressive," the Senator said. "It's not just something to help children read and be entertained, but they teach very valuable lessons about life and values."

A graduate of Fordham College and Fordham Law School, Katsoris previously served as General Counsel of the Red Apple Group for 28 years. Among his many honors is the Archbishop Iakovos Leadership 100 Award for Excellence. He resides in Eastchester, New York, with his wife Voula and their children Constantine and Julia.

Kostas Katsiris — Presented by Senator Andrew Gounardes

Senator Gounardes honored Kostas Katsiris, a nationally recognized commercial litigator at Venable LLP, where he serves on the firm's Management Committee. Katsiris has earned recognition from Chambers USA, Benchmark Litigation USA, and Super Lawyers, and has represented major clients including Marriott, Morgan

Stanley, and Macquarie in complex disputes across federal and state courts.

Gounardes spoke with particular admiration about what he called Katsiris's dedication to the next generation. "What really strikes me most about Kostas is that he has never forgotten the values his parents instilled in him," Gounardes said, noting that Katsiris is the child of Greek immigrants from Nafpaktos who grew up in Lansing, Michigan. "He has always demonstrated a willingness to reach behind him and help the next generation up the ladder — whether it's through the Hellenic Lawyers' Association or looking for Greek legal interns and summer associates at his firm."

Chris Pavlidis — Presented by Senator James Skoufis

Senator Skoufis honored Chris Pavlidis, who was born and raised in the village of Sitagri, Drama, in Northern Greece. As a young man, Pavlidis attended the Technical School of Machinists of Thessaloniki, joined the Aero Club at age 16 as a private pilot, and went on to serve in the Greek Air Force as part of the Molon Lave 342 All-Weather Squadron of Tanagra. He came to the United States in 1987, earned degrees in construction management and architecture from the New York Institute of Technology, and later worked for the Army Corps of Engineers. He is now a Senior Project Manager at Merritt & Harris Group in Orange County.

Skoufis noted that Pavlidis had founded the Hudson-Odysseus AHEPA Chapter 545, serving as its first president, and had helped knit together a scattered Greek community across the Hudson Valley. "We don't have a dense concentration like some neighborhoods in New York City do," Skoufis said. "He has helped bring so many of us together in the Hudson Valley to make sure that we promote and maintain our wonderful Greek heritage."

Dr. James Telonis — Presented by Assemblymember John Lemondes, Jr.

Assemblymember Lemondes honored Dr. James Telonis, a family physician who practiced in Central New York for more than 30 years before retiring in 2024. Born in Panagitsa, Greece, in 1955, Dr. Telonis immigrated to the United States in 1966, graduated from Le Moyne College and Upstate Medical University, and completed his residency at St. Joseph's Health Hospital in Syracuse. An active member of St. Sophia's Greek Orthodox Church in Syracuse and president of AHEPA Chapter 37 — one of New York State's oldest active chapters — Dr. Telonis directed the St. Timothy Summer Camp for more than 15 years, welcoming young people from Greek Orthodox parishes in Syracuse, Rochester, and Buffalo.

Lemondes spoke with evident emotion. "We oftentimes forget to recognize the

service of our medical professionals, because they are generally the first to greet us into the world and the last to say goodbye," he said. "This is service like no other." He added that Dr. Telonis's work with Orthodox youth at St. Timothy's Camp was "critically important in a world of distraction, to bring our children together and make sure they know who they are and where they came from."

Dr. Telonis and his wife Kelly have been married for over 42 years and have raised five children in Central New York.

Sarantos "Sandy" Vallas — Presented by Assemblymember Michael Tannousis

Assemblymember Tannousis honored Sarantos "Sandy" Vallas, a lifelong Bay Ridge, Brooklyn, resident and real estate broker who has served as chairman of Community Board 10 for 26 years. The son of Theodore and Eleni Vallas, who emigrated from Sparta in 1955, Vallas has been a fixture in the neighborhood's civic life, serving as parish council president of Holy Cross Church and participating in the parish's community outreach programs, including its midnight runs with the Boy Scouts.

Tannousis called Vallas a constant presence in Bay Ridge. "Every time there is something that our community needs, he is there," the Assemblymember said. "He always has his ear to the ground in regards to Bay Ridge. He's always helped me understand certain issues."

Vallas and his wife Maria have four children: Theodore, Demetrios, Eleni, and Elpida.

A Tribute to Senator Gianaris

The reception also served as something of a farewell for Senator Michael Gianaris, the Deputy Majority Leader of the Senate and the son of Greek immigrants from Astoria, who announced in February that he would not seek re-election after more than a quarter century in the Legislature.

Gianaris was first elected to the New York State Assembly in 2000, representing western Queens. He moved to the Senate in 2010 and has served as Deputy Majority Leader since 2019, the second-most powerful position in the chamber.



Senator Michael Gianaris speaks while Senator Andrew Gounardes looks on. Photo by Orthodox Observer/Alkis Tzortzoglou

Before the presentations began, Senator Gounardes led a tribute to his colleague. “He opened the trail for many of us that followed over the years,” Gounardes said. “First through the State Assembly, and then for the last 16 years in the State Senate.” The legislators presented Gianaris with a gift in recognition of his service.

Senator Skoufis added his own tribute, calling Gianaris “the heart and soul of this Greek legislative contingent.” He noted that with Gianaris’s departure, the Senate’s Greek caucus would be losing a third of its membership. “We will be looking to all of you to help us replenish our ranks,” Skoufis said to the audience.

Gianaris himself was visibly moved. “It’s very meaningful,” he said. “I’ve been living in the Greek community for so long that it’s always bittersweet going through these events for the last time as an elected official. Not the last time as someone who will attend these events, for sure.” He thanked his colleagues and the many state senators who had taken time during a busy legislative period to attend the celebration.

Assemblymember Tannousis, congratulating Gianaris on his 26 years of service and added: “I hope they don’t expect 26 years from us, because my five and a half years feels like a lifetime.”

A Bipartisan Gathering

The celebration drew lawmakers from across the political spectrum. Among the state senators who attended the luncheon were Senator Jeremy Zellner, an

Orthodox Christian who was recently elected in a special election from western New York; Senator Joseph Griffo, the Republican Assistant Minority Leader from Rome, New York and several other members of the Democratic and Republican conferences.

The annual celebration in Albany has become a signature event for the Greek American community in New York, organized each year by the state's Greek American legislators in partnership with the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America. In 2023, the Legislature passed resolutions recognizing March as Greek History Month in the state.



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His Eminence delivered an invocation at the assembly, and later met with New York Governor Kathy Hochul. (Photos by Orthodox Observer/Alkis Tzortzoglou).

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