

20/01/2020

Greek American Priest and Philanthropist, Devoted to Making a Difference



He is the Associate Priest at Washington DC's Saint Sophia Greek Orthodox Church. A philanthropist, and a jeweller. Any one of those professions could be overwhelming on their own, but the combination is one that the popular Greek American Father Dimitri Lee embraces with enthusiasm and gratitude.



Born and bred in Sheboygan Wisconsin, Canada, to a Greek mother (his grandmother hails from Kefalonia and had to leave the island due to the earthquakes) and an American father who converted to Greek Orthodox before marrying his mother, Father Dimitri, or 'Father D' as he is also called, is affable, approachable, accessible and has a seamless way of weaving the teachings of the Greek Orthodox faith into his discussions. He is known to begin his presentations by getting the audience to stand and join him in stretches and squats, and his weekly Facebook video messages, posted Sundays after church, interpret the

Gospel readings in a colloquial, warm and jovial manner, providing much food for thought and resonating with many around the world.

Father Dimitri knew that he wanted to go into the priesthood from the age of 17. "My family had always attended church and I spent so much time in the altar as a boy, it became part of my identity," he says. "Before completing High School, I knew the priesthood was in my path, so I applied for Hellenic College/ Holy Cross and was thankfully accepted. I spent seven amazing years in Brookline, MA getting my Bachelor's Degree and Master's of Divinity. Seminary only partially prepares you for everyday parish life, it's really like being thrown into the deep end of a pool. Sink or swim!"



In his first year of Seminary, some very good friends of his asked him to go to Kenya for a Mission trip. It sounded adventurous, so he agreed, he cites the trip as the best decision of his life and has since returned another three times. "Spending almost a month with the Kenyan people, working day and night together changed

my perspective on so many things. Materially they were very poor compared to US standards, but they had a richness of life that I had never seen before. Their beautiful souls made such an impression on me. Life was very tough for them, so they tended to find true joy in simple things; a lesson that we can all learn. Every trip is more fulfilling than you can imagine. I hope to go back soon.”

Somewhere along the way between devoting himself to his priest work, and missionary work in Kenya, Father Dimitri found the time to create his own jewellery brand, AAONYX, which features his unique bracelet, ring and necklace designs that are often laden with meaning. He also offers customized creations. The idea for AAONYX began after a beaded bracelet he owned broke, and he had to hunt down the supplies to fix it. “Before I knew it, I was making more bracelets than you can count. I can’t even really say what drove me, but I hit some creative wellspring that hasn’t stopped since,” he says.



“Owning my own business has been a pipe dream of mine for almost a decade. AAONYX, which is taken from the Greek word for eternity, ‘AIONA’, is all about connecting to something deeper,” he says. “I love the idea that gemstones and minerals are buried in the earth for possibly millions of years. We bring them out, polish them up and wear them without thinking much about it. But the truth is, long after we’re gone, those beautiful stones don’t age as we do.”

Relishing this new creative outlet, Father Dimitri finds creating new pieces and designs rewarding, especially when he sees others enjoying his work, and suffice to say he has never been busier. “I’ve had to learn how to manage my time and burn the candle at both ends,” he says. “Things won’t always be this crazy, but for now I’m used to the workload. Thankfully I was able to hire a few people, which has helped tremendously.”

Surrounded by a myriad of colour to work with, including apatite, turquoise, and amber, Father Dimitri’s favourite is Lapis Lazuli. “The rich blues are so mesmerizing and calming at the same time. It’s no wonder the ancient Egyptians believed Lapis to be the currency of the afterlife. It truly is a spectacular color that occurs naturally without artificiality. I typically design with a minimal and symmetrical sense. Less is always more!” His latest design, which has just been launched is a handcrafted silver Alpha and Omega Cross.

AAONYX also enables Father Dimitri, and his customers, to give to those in need, with 25% of every purchase donated to help families through International Orthodox Christian Charities (IOCC). At the time of their purchase, a customer can designate to which country they would like their contribution to go. Included in the list of countries is Uganda, Haiti, Greece, The Holy Land, and Syria.



Having such a broad experience across different walks of life gives him great insight into the issues affecting society. Asked what the biggest challenge is for people in this current time, he replies without hesitation. “We’re facing a total deluge of information instantly shared at all times. The technology has greatly outpaced our biological mental capacities. The instant access to so much information has created deep insecurity and anxiety in so many people. It’s like background noise, most of us don’t even know we’re constantly stressed and anxious until we’re not.”

Priests are frequently asked for advice, and the one piece of advice Father Dimitri finds himself giving continuously is one we can all apply to our lives, “Let it GO!” he says. “Stop holding onto negativity. Don’t be defined by your pain, hurt, frustration, depression, anxiety, or the constant feeling of inadequacy. You are not your thoughts.”

Asked how we can stress less and feel closer to God, his response is one about perspective and nature. “Unplug!” he says. “Find time to be alone in nature. Concentrate on the beautiful openness of the sky and contemplate how vast creation is. Our tiny problems melt away when we look at the whole context of the world. The Holy Spirit is present in every particle and atom of the universe, it’s hard

to feel separate from God!

Father Dimitri's prayer for the new year ahead is about renewing focus on the present and gratitude for the things we have. "My prayer for 2020 is for the desperate longing for something better around the corner to stop. Life is great as is, we just have to open our eyes to the present moment. Life will never be better yesterday or tomorrow, it simply is."

You can follow Father Dimitri on Facebook @aaonyx or on his website aaonyx

greekcitytimes.com