

30/06/2020

Archdiocesan Council Keynote Address by His Eminence Archbishop Elpidophoros of America



To the Archdiocesan Council

In New York City

(June 29, 2020)

Your Eminences,

Your Graces,

Mr. John Catsimatidis, Archon and Vice-Chair of this Archdiocesan Council,

Distinguished members of the Executive Committee and esteemed members of the Archdiocesan Council,

Beloved brothers and sisters in Christ,

Today, as we meet in this new way as an Archdiocesan Council, I express to each and every one of you my gratitude and respect for the way you have all come together in these difficult times for the sake of our Church and particularly, for the sake of our sacred Archdiocese.

Here we are, just one week from the anniversary of my enthronement as your Archbishop, and yet, for me, it feels like a decade or more has passed since that sun-filled day in June of last year, when I embraced you – and more importantly, when you embraced me.

While much has transpired in this past year – and specifically in the eight months since our Fall meeting – it is important to note a few salient milestones that strengthen our resolve and renew our hope for the future.

First, the Saint Nicholas Church and National Shrine at Ground Zero. We will shortly hear about the current situation from our Chair and Co-Chair, Dennis Mehiel and Michael Psaros, but in the meantime, I would like to highlight the truly remarkable efforts that were made to further this all-important project and ministry over these last few months.

In a virtual miracle of widespread generosity – thanks to the exceptional leadership of the Alex G. and Faith Spanos Family, as well as the extraordinary efforts of the FAITHEndowment, Leadership 100, the Vicar General of the Archdiocese, Father Alexander Karloutsos, our Council Vice-Chair, John Catsimatidis, and the Friends of St. Nicholas – all of the costs associated with restarting the work were covered, and we have nearly reached our goal to complete the funding of the full cost of construction.

Even under the difficult circumstances of this pandemic, the project is well under way and is recommencing on-site at Ground Zero in accordance with local guidelines. I cannot express enough my abiding gratitude to all those who have nobly and graciously offered their generous support for the Saint Nicholas Church and National Shrine. We were facing a possible loss of the whole project and the disappointment of a generation. But now, as we are pressing forward, it is incumbent on us to do our part to keep faith with all the donors and all the faithful, and, perhaps more importantly, the martyrs and heroes of that day and the

American People who deserve this National Shrine and Memorial Church. We shall not rest until our work is complete. For just as diamonds are formed under immense pressure, St. Nicholas will emerge from this situation as a brilliantly shining gem of our Archdiocese for the whole world to see. By the Grace of God and the prayers of Saint Nicholas, we shall bring this sacred task to fulfillment and open the Church next year, the twentieth year from that fateful day of 9/11.

Second, I would like to commend in superlative terms the President of Hellenic College Holy Cross, George Cantonis. Weeks before accepting the presidency of the School, he was working around the clock to save the School from losing its accreditation. We have certainly not been exempt from the challenges that COVID-19 has presented to all institutions of higher learning. The fact that there is a plan for continuation in the Fall Semester is a tribute to the energetic work and dedication that has been the hallmark of his presidency. And we are not “out of the woods” yet, but we are finally coming to a place of establishing a stable administrative and financial environment for the School.

As you know, from my first moments as Archbishop of these blessed United States of America, St. Nicholas has been at the forefront of our efforts. Now, however, the time has come to concentrate our focus on our beloved Scholi. Hellenic College and Holy Cross must become a premiere establishment of our Archdiocese, and an exemplary institution of higher learning. Our faithful should not feel pressured to support it merely because it is “the seminary”, but because this school of ours will stand on its own as an institution of the highest caliber, an unsurpassed academic and spiritual establishment of excellence that our people can trust and believe in. We should be in a position to accept only the best applicants – to choose from the cream of the crop. Our professors must be the preeminent scholars in their fields of study. I say these things because the truth is this: the Church in America needs this School, for it produces the fruit from which our faithful across this blessed land are fed and sustained.

Simply put, our School should be the pride and joy of our Archdiocese, an integral piece in the composition of the rich cultural and religious mosaic that make up this noble Nation. Hellenic College should produce such dynamic leaders of Hellenism so as to take our presence as Greek-Americans in society to new heights. Our Theological School should produce the best and most competent leaders for our church here in America. For if, as the Evangelist says, “the harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few”,^[1] then it is the duty and vocation of our Scholi to produce such laborers of the Gospel. But there is also a sacred responsibility that falls to you, the mothers, fathers and grandparents, to nurture and plant into the fertile

hearts of your children and grandchildren the seeds of our holy Orthodox faith. This is accomplished more easily than you may think; through your words, your actions, your demeanor, your own deep faith in Christ. I encourage you to send your children to our school, because, we need young men and young women, who aspire to the priesthood or a life of service to the Church. Indeed, we need the best and brightest minds to be the next generation of leaders for our Church and society.

Third, I want to thank the many people who throughout the years have dedicated themselves, tirelessly and selflessly, to the work of our sacred Archdiocese. We did not come to where we are today from nothing, *ex nihilo*. We have been gifted this gage, this παρακαταθήκη, from those who have labored here before us in the vineyard of the Lord here in America. Besides our clergy, many of these people have put in countless hours of work as volunteers – to the point where one might ask if they work more for the betterment of our Church and Archdiocese than for their own profession. For this reason, I am proposing the creation of a special advisory body, called, “Senators for Orthodoxy and Hellenism.” These Senators will have the role to advise and assist the Archdiocesan Council and the Archbishop. In order for this body to be successful, it will need to have the perfect combination of mentorship for the new generation, with their energy, innovative ideas and creative thinking, and the steadfastness of the senior generation, whose years of experience and sage wisdom on church governance we can ill afford to lose.

Fourth, I want to thank my Most Reverend Brother Hierarchs of the Holy Eparchial Synod for their spirit of cooperation and empathy during the crisis of this pandemic. We have communicated openly with each other to find the best ways to minister to the flock entrusted to our care. Each of us possesses a unique perspective and personal history that shapes our decisions, both individually and collectively. However, what is most important is that each of us stands united in our support of the Ecumenical Patriarchate and our spiritual Father, His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew.

Fifth, I wish to commend the staff of the Archdiocese and all the dedicated clergy across the country, who have faced this unprecedented crisis with steady effort, faith in God, and trust in our Christ-loving people. We were all deeply affected by the loss of Holy Week and the celebrations of Pascha. Although the clergy celebrated alone and we broadcast the services through digital means, I think it is fair to say that it may have been harder for the clergy than the laity. For, it is always harder to see a loss for your child than for yourself. Indeed, we felt the deprivation, the pain, and the loneliness of our flocks.

Now, we are in the delicate process of reopening, even as there may be a

resurgence of the coronavirus. We must be cautious and take great care that we do not scandalize the faithful by pretending that the Church environment is somehow magically risk-free. Our faith in the Holy Eucharist itself does not extend to every floorboard, pew, and surface inside the church.

There are those who believe that faith can be quantified by how strongly one is attached to a particular idea. That is not faith, though – only wishful thinking at best, and magical thinking at worst. We must be faithful to the Gospel and to the Tradition of the Church, but not at the expense of common sense and reason. There is still a great deal to learn about this pandemic – whether it will soon end of itself, whether it will return next winter, or whether we will be forced to close our churches again in compliance with governmental and public health orders. The Lord once commanded His Disciples to be “as wise as serpents and as harmless as doves.”[2] We also must be both φρόνιμοι and ἀκέραιοι as we seek to do what is best for our communities going forward.

I was looking forward to following up with you, as I said last October, in examining “the Archdiocese’s administration, operations, communications and ministries as a modern, transparent and contemporary church, meeting the needs of our faithful.” The coronavirus interrupted this process, but perhaps initiated another one just as valuable. Over the past few months, we have learned to do more with less. And I am hopeful that one of the silver linings of this viral cloud that has engulfed us will be a new and more efficient Archdiocese and National church operation.

I have also begun my own process of responding to the community-at-large – something, of course, that has raised the eyebrows of a few, but also the hopes of many. Just as my blessed and ever-memorable predecessor, the late Archbishop Iakovos, came to know all too well, national leadership is always a risk, especially in the polarized condition of our Nation today. Nevertheless, it is the responsibility of all Hierarchs to present to their faithful and to the world the image of the Gospel and the Good Shepherd, our Lord Jesus Christ. And I would like for all of you to know that I am open to your feedback and counsel, just as how I am certain that my brother Metropolitans are open to it as well. We all look to our Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, who for nearly thirty years has led by example in word and deed.

The time is at hand to renew and to grow the presence of our Church—united—on the National stage. This is not about individual egos; it is about our responsibility to live the Gospel in the midst of our society. Believe me, when Saint Nicholas opens at Ground Zero, we will be thrust onto that stage in a way we never have seen before! We must be prepared to carry that cross and live up to the high calling that

is our vocation as Greek Orthodox Christians and as Americans – whether of Hellenic descent or not.

In order to do this, I believe that it is our unity as one sacred Archdiocese of America that is our greatest strength. Yes, we are in every one of the fifty states (except for North Dakota), and we are established in our local communities. But this is not enough. As I stated last October, “we are apportioned for service through all of the organs of the Church.” We must coordinate that diakonia together as a unified Archdiocese and present it to our own and, indeed, to the whole world for the edification of all.

My dear brothers and sisters, during this time of anxiety, fear, unrest, and confusion, the Church must shine brighter than ever before. People, all people, want and need something to believe in. We have the greatest gift that the world has ever known, the experience of God’s love that can transform even the hardest heart into a loving, caring, and decent person. I thank you once again for your steadfast dedication and unwavering devotion, and I embrace each and every one of you as my co-workers in Christ. Together, we must seize this moment and make it the proudest one that our Church in America has ever known.

May God bless you all!

[1] Matthew 9:37

[2] Mathew 10:16.

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