01/06/2021

Answering the call to take up the life of a parish priest

Image not found or type unknown

It is a path that few will follow and the decision to enter the priesthood seems an even harder one to make in this most secular of ages. Neos Kosmos spoke to Fr Dimosthenes Nicolaou and Fr Nicholas Georgiou about their road to becoming Greek Orthodox priests.

Father Nicholas Gerogiou is the priest for The Presentation of Our Lady to the Temple in North Balwyn. He told Neos Kosmos that in his youth, he had always been the life of the party. While his parents were very religious and took him to church when he was young, he was to drift away as he got older.

“I distanced myself (from the church) to go to movies and the cafes more.

He left school at 15 to enter a trade working as a builder and carpenter.

“The older I got, the more empty I felt. Then, in my mid-20s it all changed. I looked for purpose, for the bigger picture in life and where to find fulfilment.

“The first thing I did was to look at my identity and began searching into Orthodox spirituality.

“One Sunday, I decided to attend my local church to the surprise of my parents who saw me there. Whilst I was there, I felt a joy which cannot be described until this day.

After two-and-a-half years of reflecting and learning more about Orthodox spirituality, he dropped the bomb on the family when he announced that he wanted to go to Sydney to study at St Andrew’s Theological College.

“I took the decision even if it meant that I would have to live in Sydney with no income from work and away from my family of friends.”

READ MORE: Technology helps but priests feel pain of separation from their flock

He said he had no expectations that he would end up a priest at the end of his studies.

The big adjustment was learning to be a student again.

“It had been 10 years since I had last been in a classroom. It was a challenge that took me three years to overcome.

The question arose about what he wanted to do after his studies.

“Do I become a teacher, a social worker or a priest? I asked the dean of the college (the Late Archbishop of Australia Stylianos) and he said: ‘you are to become a priest.’”

At the end of his studies in 2016, he returned to Melbourne to work as a social worker at The Transfiguration of Our Lord church in Thomastown.

In June of that year, he married Dr Rothanthi Daglas, a research fellow in mental health at the University of Melbourne. After she provided her written consent, he was formally asked to be a priest.

On 26 November, 2016, he took the first step to the priesthood when he was ordained a deacon and was appointed the personal deacon to the late Archbishop Stylianos of Australia whom he served for three years.

He was ordained a priest on 6 August, 2019 by Archbishop Makarios of Australia, and appointed to The Presentation of Our Lady to the Temple in North Balwyn.

“I knew what it was to manage something, but I did not know what it was to be a parish priest’” he said.

Developing relations in a new parish is a hard task but it was made far harder with the onset of COVID just months after he took his place at the parish.

“It was very challenging and disappointing as I wanted to minister to the people and have personal encounters with them during the lockdowns and had to find ways of meeting them (mainly online and by telephone) without breaking government rules.

“Every generation faces its challenges and the (COVID) outbreak is the first challenge we have faced. It has taught us to appreciate life and see that it all can change in an instant. Who could have imagined that the whole world came to a standstill because of a virus?

“We are all on a journey to God and have to support each other in reaching Him.”

“In becoming a priest, I have not given up much in life really, but rather I have gained a lot. I am very grateful for what I have, mainly my ministry as a Priest, my wife, and my three children. I am still the same person, and people who knew me before, see me as the same person.
Fr Dimosthenes (Demos) Nicolaou of the Holy Church of Saint Paraskevi, Saint Barbara, Saint John the Merciful and Our Mother of Consolation in St Albans has been a priest for 12 years.

His path to the priesthood was a little different from that of Fr Nicholas because he knew from an early age that he wanted to be a priest.

“When I played games as child, I would always pretend I was a priest. It was always in my mind that this would be my path,” he said.

“My parents were not religious. I would take them to church. As long as I can remember I would say ‘I am going to be a priest’ and my aunts would kiss me on the hand as a joke.

“I cannot say what it was that drew me. It’s a calling and you accept it.

He said the reality that he was preparing for the priesthood hit him in Year 11 and 12 when he had to choose his subjects that would best prepare him for theological studies.

His father wanted him to focus on his education and he would use school text books to disguise his real reading material which were religious texts relating to Christianity and Orthodoxy.

After finishing high school, he enrolled at St Andrew’s Theological College for four years of study of Orthodox Christianity as well as courses in pastoral care for working in the community, aged care facilities and prisons.

He also had to learn Koine Greek of the New Testament that is used in the liturgy and in Byzantine music – another challenge for an Orthodox seminarian.

“The hardest thing for me was picking up the notes of Byzantine music which is very different to Western European music. It is based on the Arabic language and the trick is to never wait until you run of breath but to employ short and very constant breathing during the singing.

“One of the beauties of Orthodox worship is that it is directed to our hearts and not our intellect. It is why a lot of people who are exposed to the church in some mystical sense understand everything that is spoken (in the liturgy) is to the heart and not the intellect.”

About a year after he finished his studies, Fr Demos married Eleni. Before he could be ordained Eleni also had to provide her written consent for him to join the priesthood.

“The priest’s wife’s role is very important. Her role is not something that is taught but she learns from experience. A lot of what she does is behind the scenes,” said Fr Demos.

“My presvytera is by nature a quiet person, I rely on her. She is there for me at the end of difficult days, she encourages and gives me strength to minister and on top of that she is trying to raise four children. A priest can be gone from the early morning before the family wakes up and return late when everyone is asleep and that can go on for days at a time.”

“I had expected a lot of hardship, but I have found love and generosity and I have been humbled by it. There are difficulties but love gives you the strength to carry on.

“Some of the difficulties come from encountering people’s pain. A priest must suffer with the people to fulfil his role – he needs to know to rejoice when they rejoice and suffer when they suffer.”

neoskosmos.com

