

PARISH PROFILE

Inner-City Church, Once the Archdiocese's Largest, Adapting to 21st Century

AT A GLANCE

Name: St. Spyridon Greek Orthodox Church
Location: New York City (Washington Heights)
Founded: 1931
Clergy: Fr. Nicolas Kazarian (St. Sergious Orthodox Theological Institute in Paris and at the Ecumenical Center in Chambesy, Switzerland)
Size: About 125 stewards
Web: www.saintspyridon.net
E-mail: office@saintspyridon.net
Noteworthy: Home parish of Metropolitan Methodios of Boston and Metropolitan Evangelos of New Jersey



ST. SPYRIDON CHURCH COMPLEX with the sanctuary (at right) and the former parochial school building.

WASHINGTON HEIGHTS, N.Y. – Located in Upper Manhattan, where the George Washington Bridge connects New York City to New Jersey, this neighborhood of approximately 160,000 residents was settled by Greek immigrants about 100 years ago. Irish immigrants arrived a few years earlier and Jews escaping persecution in Europe began arriving in the 1930s, according to a Wikipedia history.

Many notables were either raised or lived in the neighborhood, including opera singer Maria Callas, singer Harry Belafonte, NY Yankee legend Lou Gehrig, former Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan, and former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger.

Also native to Washington Heights are George Tournaras (now Metropolitan Methodios of Boston) and Evangelos Kourounis (Metropolitan of New Jersey) who grew up in and pastored the parish prior to their elevation to the episcopacy.

By the 1950s and 60s, Washington Heights earned the nickname “Astoria of Manhattan” because of the very large Greek community.

In the 1920s, attempts were made to organize a parish, “Pantanassa—the Virgin Mary,” according to a parish history. Fr. Kanellos Kanellopoulos held services at several locations.

With the arrival of the Very Rev. Archimandrite Vaselios Lokis in 1931, the church was formerly organized as St. Spyridon Church. Many of its first members originated in Corfu (whose patron saint is St. Spyridon), though other places of origin include Kastoria, Ithaca, northern Epirus, Crete and Athens.

After worshipping at various locations that included a small hall above a theater, a room above a garage and an auditorium offered by a neighborhood Episcopal church, the community acquired a permanent location at 124 Wadsworth Ave., its present site, that had been built as a Baptist church then

was used as a Masonic temple.

It was eventually purchased for \$50,000.

Though it endured difficult times during the Great Depression, the parish eventually grew to 850 members by 1942, with 600 Sunday school students. Archimandrite Lokis celebrated the first Divine Liturgy in 1935.

During the Depression, Rev. Deacon Theodotiros Kokkinakis, who later became Bishop of Boston, then Archbishop of Great Britain, served the parish as deacon, chantor and secretary, for a \$90-a-month salary.

A catastrophic fire destroyed the existing building. Property was purchased next to the site and, after two buildings were purchased adjacent to the property, a Byzantine church complex was built.

Archimandrite Lokis returned to serve as priest in the 1950s. His assistant was a newly ordained priest who was raised in the parish, Fr. John Psillas.

The new church was opened in 1952 by Archbishop Michael. Fr. Lokis died of a heart attack in 1953 and, in 1955, Fr. John Poulos was assigned and served until the church was consecrated in May 1958.

A parochial school was built on part of the property, which Archbishop Iakovos opened in April 1959 as the Theodore P. Tsolainos-Constantine Goulandris Parochial School, its two great benefactors.

Archbishop Iakovos appointed Fr. Alkiviadis Calivas as pastor, who served until 1976, when he pursued studies in Greece and eventually became a distinguished professor at HCHC.

Others who served the parish included Frs. Constantine Xanthakis, George Matsis and Theodore Soupis. The community became the largest in the U.S., with over 900 members.

Social changes, including the proliferation of drugs, beginning in the late 1960s and continuing to the 1980s resulted in many families leaving the neighborhood.

Archbishop Iakovos named his Archdeacon, Fr. Methodios Tournaras, as the pastor. During his ministry, three

additional buildings located across the street from the church were purchased and constitute a major source of revenue for the parish.

Fr. Methodios led the 50th anniversary celebration of St. Spyridon in 1981, which was also attended by then Gov. Hugh Carey of New York.

After Fr. Methodios' ordination as a bishop, Fr. John Poulos returned as pastor of eight years, followed by the Very Rev. Chrysanthos Zois and Anastasios Garaboa and Fr. Evangelos Kourounis.

In the 1990s, the parochial school began offering a Pre-K program funded by the City of New York. However, following the tenure of Fr. George Passias, the school closed in 2016.

St. Spyridon today

Parish membership now consists of about 125 stewards.

Fr. Nicolas was assigned as pastor on June 1, 2017. A native of France, he received his theological education at St. Sergious Orthodox Theological Institute and at the Ecumenical Center in Chambesy, Switzerland.

He was ordained a priest at St. Stephen Greek Orthodox Cathedral in Paris in 2014 and served as assistant to Metropolitan Emmanuel of France until moving to Philadelphia where he served as a substitute priest in the Metropolis of New Jersey.

With the demographic changes in the parish, there is no Greek school and the Sunday school has an enrollment of 15 children.

“Because our group is not large, we can focus on giving individual attention to each child. They are all important, and their Sunday School teachers have strong individual relationships with all of them,” Fr. Nicolas said.

“Once a month, I also give a children’s sermon. It is a great way to engage them in the life of the church, to help them find what they want to do, and most importantly to pass on the core of our faith. It is also funny having adults tell me they really like it because the message is simple and more direct. Our community also has several projects which serve St. Basil Academy.

The parish is currently finishing a major restoration project and comple-

tion is slated for October. The public dedication ceremony will take place Oct. 14.

“Times have changed, and Hellenism moved out of Washington Heights to other areas,” Fr. Nicolas continued. “Having said that, I feel am very encouraged to see more and more young adults and families with young children attending our church. The neighborhood is evolving, as is our community. After the completion of the restoration project, the faithful are diving into an authentic spiritual experience of the Orthodox Church. The community is diverse and is a powerful reminder of the universal nature of the Gospel, and I am very optimistic about the future of our church. As baptized Orthodox Christians, we all belong and are members of the body of Christ. This reality becomes tangible through our participation in the sacraments of the Church, especially the Eucharist, as well as by being stewards of the Church.”

An active Philoptochos?

“Our Philoptochos is in many ways the heart and soul of our community,” Fr. Nicolas said. “These ladies work tirelessly to serve the parish and manage its charity work. To give just one example of their projects, during Great Lent they organized a community project to prepare hygiene kits for IOCC. The Philoptochos is the charity arm of the community. But they also organize the coffee hour every Sunday, they help people in need, they raise money in different ways.

They are always present. I feel honored and humbled to work with such an amazing team of women.”

Aside from rental income, major revenue sources include an increasing focus on stewardship and a small Greek festival that takes place over three days in November.

Fr. Nicolas describes his parish ministry as follows: “When I first arrived, my mission among them is to care and to inspire.

“I think these are two ways to develop not only our church ministries but also our outreach.

“To be successful in achieving these two goals, we need to be able to translate the eternal experience of the Orthodox Church into the words of today’s culture.

“To me, the issue of language is crucial for connecting our everyday life with the life of the Church. The difficulty is not only to understand what the Church Fathers, for instance, said, but also what they meant.

“There is a very rich wisdom and revelation in the Holy Scriptures, in the patristic texts, in the hymnography of our Church.

“But translation is not only from the past to the present age, it is also from one language to another. There is a pastoral dimension in choosing which language (Greek and English in this case) to use during church services.

“This is critical for the sake of being able to transmit the reality of our faith. In other words, translation becomes a vector for tradition.”

Compiled by Jim Golding