Lydia Vagelos – Callimanis
"Dedicated to Orthodoxy, Hellenism and in the Hellenes Abroad"
The woman chosen by the directors and the editorial staff of the "National Herald", Mrs. Lydia Vagelos - Callimanis, to honor the April "Woman's" magazine in April, defines her and describes her: "Dedicated to Orthodoxy, Hellenism and in the Hellenes Abroad ".

She has been elected to the presidency of the historical community of Saint Spyridon church in New York, and at a time extremely difficult for the community, since the wounds from the unfortunate scandal of the former priest of George Passias, shocked the community.

Not only the community, but also the entire Archdiocese of America and the Orthodox Churches around the world. Mrs. Callimanis and her colleagues in the community not only succeeded in rebuilding the pretense of the community, normalizing the situation, but at the same time launching a superhuman effort to restore the historic Temple of the church and especially its iconography, and bring it back to its former glory.

The course of seventy-plus years of the temple and iconography have marked the interior and exterior of the temple, and the president, Mrs. Callimanis, has set her goal of redefining it to a masterpiece temple worthy of God's worship and praise. She has left her career to devote herself to the restoration work of Saint Spyridon. She told us that her motte is that "charity is a great ministry of our church. Although women are baking and serving, we still can play a leading role in our church. The work of restoration is a prime example. " Donations through the Community it is stressed that those who wish to contribute financially to this work of restoration of the church of Saint Spyridon can contact the community office for details.

In a very special published booklet, among others, refers the verse from the 2nd Corinthian Epistle of the Apostle Paul that says "the ancient things are gone, and we see everything" and it is emphasized that "our blessed church has suffered so much, but as the above paragraph reminds us, "the old ones have passed and the new ones have come".

The booklet also states that "the iconography of the church of Saint Spyridon is a link with our Orthodox Faith and our Greek heritage. It is a reminder of the credibility and bravery of the dynamic Hellenic American Community, which built the temple in the Washington Heights area. The people and parishioners from Saint Spyridon has been dispersed throughout the Greek Orthodox Community's throughout the country. Who has not heard about Saint Spyridon? Who has not been touched by this incredible community? Who has no friendships for a lifetime that were not made at Saint Spyridon? This is the miracle of Our Patron Saint with whom we have been blessed. " The booklet emphasizes that "we have undertaken the restoration of the interior of the temple in order to preserve this connection with our past to become our covenant for the future."

It is emphasized that "iconography, woodcuts, marbles, everything is from Greece and were the best that existed at that time. But the temple is almost 70 years old and the images are in great need of restoration and cleaning. Let's not lose them."
The brochure also states that "any donation will be greatly appreciated. Choose an image that you would like to be restored or even a section of our beautiful temple ".

Mrs. Callimanis has a great love, appreciation and bond with the community of Saint Spyridon because she grew up in the church where her uncle Theodore Tsolainos was a great benefactor and her grandfather Jason Chios was the Archon of the Ecumenical Patriarchate. Her mother Demetra and her grandmother Sylvia were active members of the Philoptochos Sisterhood, so Ms. Lydia Callimanis followed in their footsteps, starting from Goya and reaching the presidency of the community parish council. Her brother Theodore lives in Florida. She is the niece of the well-known entrepreneur and philanthropist Dr. P. Roy Vagelos. Lydia studied at Barnard School and then at Briarcliff College in Briarcliff Manor, New York. She started her career at A & S Department Store, worked as a manager at the Men's Department and then went to BATUS in the purchasing and marketing department. She met her husband John Callimanis in 1986.

Mr. Callimanis is Vice President of UBS bank (Senior Vice President UBS). They have two children, Nicole, a graduate of University of the Pennsylvania, who works in the advertising sector, and Philip, who is a third-year Bucknell University student with a major in Economics. After her children started school she became a designer and producer of children's clothing. Mrs. Callimanis said that "my grandparents and my parents transferred my love and devotion to the family and I have tried to transfer this to our children."

The roots of the family
Mrs. Callimanis' parents were born in the United States. Her grandfather Homer from her father's side was born in Mikra Asia and her grandmother Dinomachi in Mytilene. Sylvia's grandfather from her mother's side was born in Mikra Asia and her grandfather in Euboea. She visits Greece every summer. "My father-in-law built a home in Ithaca where my father-in-law was born and we spend our summers there", she said. And she continued: "We cannot imagine going anywhere except Greece in the summer." She added that "I spent countless summers in Greece when I grew up a little girl and now with my family. Our children have grown up on the island and consider it their second home. " Mrs. Callimanis spoke with warm words of love and appreciation for her children: "My children are my pride and my joy."

The best of two worlds
To the question, "How was it growing up in a Greek-American home in New York? Do you feel unique or different?" She replied that "I feel I had the best of both worlds. I went to the Barnard School, which was only for girls where there were two other Greek girls, so I was surrounded with
At home my grandparents spoke to me only in Greek. When I first started going to kindergarten I only spoke Greek. The weekends we went to our country house in Allenhurst, New Jersey, where we also belonged to the St. George’s community in Asbury Park.

I went to the Greek school on Saturdays and Sunday School. So when I grew up I had the best of both communities, St. George and Saint Spyridon. I also belonged to Goya of Saint Spyridon. Growing up as a Greek American in New York was an unforgettable and excellent opportunity. So even though my education was more American, cosmic and cultural, at the same time I was immersed in the Greek-American experience that was offered to me at home and also by our two very important parishes. “She continued, saying that "I felt unique and different”

I grew up in a traditional house and I saw that most of my girlfriends at school did not have the same traditions and close ties that I had with my grandparents."

As she explained, “I think I had the same experiences that most of my piers had growing up Greek. Our grandparents tried to "join" us into the American culture and society while desperately clinging to their own heritage, culture and faith. Of course, I felt different, I felt then and I believe that children feel different today. I raised my children to be courageous and proud of what they are and where they came from."

Prominent members of the Omogeneia
The family of Mrs. Lydia Callimanis includes prominent members of the omogeneia and Greece for whom we asked her to speak to us. "My grandmother's brother was Theodore Tsolainos, who was a member of the New York Stock Exchange and the Great Benefactor of the community of Saint Spyridon, his wife, Mariangoula, was my godmother. I remember on Sundays my Uncle Theodore sat in the big red armchair in front of the temple. My other grandmother's brother, Kyriakos Tsolainos, was the secretary of Eleftherios Venizelos-prime minister in Greece. When he came to the United States he married Phoebe, who was a direct descendant of Jefferson Davis. Uncle Kyriakos was a partner in the investment company Baker Weeks. My nounos-sponsor was Nikos Goulandris, who with his brother Constantine were Great Benefactors of the community of Saint Spyridon. I remember when I was a little girl listening to stories about how the church of Saint Spyridon was built. They went to Czechoslovakia to pick out the chandeliers. My grandfather, Jason Chios, was Archon and stood in the pangari at every church service. Now I stand at the pangari with the same pride and I wonder if my grandfather can see me.”
The Great Benefactors traveled everywhere in the world to get inspiration. They traveled to Greece and visited churches there. Our family had the blessing to be Saint Spyridon founders, and these wonderful people are the cause that we are devoted to the mission of the survival of the community of Saint Spyridon. " She added that "it was always more than just a church; it is about the inheritance of Greek Orthodox Christians in America. My relatives contributed to the rebuilding of Saint Spyridon as it is today and it is our responsibility to continue their work.

Then and now
She stressed that “Saint Spyridon is part of my family tradition since I can remember. There is no doubt that it was different then, it was one of the largest communities in the country. Today, perhaps the number of people on the ramparts is not the same as then, but their responsibility for continuing the Orthodox Faith and the Greek Heritage continues with the same love and dedication."

She underlined that “today we are in a neighborhood inhabited by immigrants from the Dominican Republic, which means that the daily life of our community has changed. One of the goals of our community council is to work with the new priest when appointed, in order to promote a truly serious approach to this population."

We have submitted to Mrs. Callimanis the following questions about the ex-priest George Passias - he has been defrocked today - and an evolution of things: “As you were the assistant treasurer between 2008 and 2009 what happened with Passias? Had the Community Council informed the Archdiocese? Why did the community allow Passias to run it as its own business? How did the scandal influence the community and with which way?
“Mrs. Callimanis said that” last year, the Community Council and I had worked very intensely to cure the community and, at the same time, to look after the financial difficulties we found in the community when we took over its leadership.

I will not comment on the details of the situation regarding our former priest or about the period of time that he was our priest, apart from saying that there has been a great damage to the soul of our parish from his service here. Many people felt that they had lost their home or were not welcomed.

Our mission is to reach the parish school graduates and bring them back. We have taken many steps to make them feel welcome again and at the same time we have made significant progress in ensuring the financial stability of the community. Our mission is on the way forward, which we have undoubtedly succeeded. We held a dinner in honor of Metropolitan of New Jersey Evangelos on December 4, in which 496 people participated."

To the question of financial audit, she replied that “this is something that the Archdiocese has ordered, so I refer you to them for comment.”

For the Community School
Regarding the School, he said: "Unfortunately, the Day School Tsolainos Goulandris was closed last year. The reality we had to deal with was that there was no need for such a School in this dynamic and diverse community of Upper Manhattan. The simple truth is that the School was in such a great debt and could not come back and survive. In order to ensure that education is still part of the community, we rented school facilities to a Charter School which successfully started its operation this Fall."

What do you think are the most serious problems and challenges for the Church in America today, both at the local and the Archbishopric level? " We asked. "I am very concerned about our own community of Saint Spyridon and I do everything I can to perpetuate Saint Spyridon church success,” she said. And she added, "We all need to work together as communities and as an Archdiocese to find this success."

Regarding which language she prefers in worship, she said that “it is a matter of opinion, I prefer Greek in the Divine Liturgy and English for the Sermon”.

In the community of Saint Spyridon served Metropolitan of Boston Methodios and the Metropolitan of New Jersey Evangelos as priests. Mrs. Callimanis stated that "we had as a community the blessing to have these two hierarchs as our priests. When Metropolitan Methodios came, he worked 16 hours a day. I often saw him mopping the floor of the kitchen. He renewed the youth of Saint Spyridon Church. Metropolitan Evangelos is a graduate of the Day School. He grew up in the community and then came and served as priest. He is a good friend and supporter of the community in every way ".
Mrs. Callimanis said that "I have always been and I am very proud of my Greek heritage. I appreciate our rich tradition, the oral and the written, which has been delivered-transferred to my family by the generations that preceded ours."

What really makes the church of Saint Spyridon unique is its incredible iconography painted by some of the most famous and talented artists.

Icon of the Annunciation from the iconostasis of the church created in Greece.

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The photos below of the Saint Spyridon Icon. The left was taken before restoration and the right is after. You can see the beauty that is taking place with just this one sample.
We gratefully appreciate your donation in helping us restore our beautiful Saint Spyridon Church.