



The rebirth of St. Spyridon

Washington Heights church prepares to unveil restoration

Story and photos by Gregg McQueen

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"The church is really a joy."

Fr. Nicolas Kazarian gazed upon the vibrant murals, bright gold wall decorations, and gleaming chandeliers that comprise the interior of St. Spyridon Greek Orthodox Church as he spoke on a recent afternoon.

"It's one of the most beautiful Greek Orthodox churches in New York, and I would say, in America," remarked Kazarian, Parish Priest of St. Spyridon, located at [124 Wadsworth Avenue](#) near 179th Street.

The church's patron saint was the bishop of Tremithus in Cyprus. He was considered one of the most miraculous saints of the Greek Orthodox Church, and was often referred to as "The Wonderworker."

Now the local institution of worship and its members have fresh wonders to celebrate.

Built in 1952, the building recently underwent an extensive restoration project that took more than two years to complete.

St. Spyridon's Parish Council spearheaded an effort to restore the church's interior meticulously, including the historic frescos, in its original Byzantine style. An iconographer was hired to resuscitate murals soiled by decades of dust and candle smoke, while walls and windows that had languished in disrepair were fixed.

Lydia Vagelos-Callimanis, President of the Parish Council, said the renovations were long overdue, as parishioners had been vexed by water leaks and crumbling plaster.

"You'd sit in the pews and it would be crumbling, the frescos over your head," she said. "Since the 1980's, there was really no maintenance whatsoever."

Now, the church has been brought back to its former glory, with every effort made to adhere to in the workmanship and style of the original artwork.



St. Spyridon Greek Orthodox Church has undergone a significant restoration.

The iconographer and his crew were required to work on scaffolding 75 feet high to complete restoration of the church's dome interior.



"This is the legacy that we're trying to safeguard," said Fr. Nicolas Kazarian.

Renovations began in March 2016 and finished in June of this year, with money raised by donations from parishioners and alumni.

The council declined to cite specific renovation costs or totals raised.

"We took a different approach to fundraising. We made a brochure and had people donate money to restore specific icons, so it could have more personal meaning for them. The restoration took a lot of people working together but we did it," said Vagelos-Callimanis, who is the great-niece of one of St. Spyridon's founders.

"I basically grew up here," she said. "It means a lot to see it looking now the way it did when I was a child."

"You saw with the restoration, how people will put all their hearts, all their money, all their effort into making this a special church," added Kazarian. "This is the legacy that we're trying to safeguard and protect here."

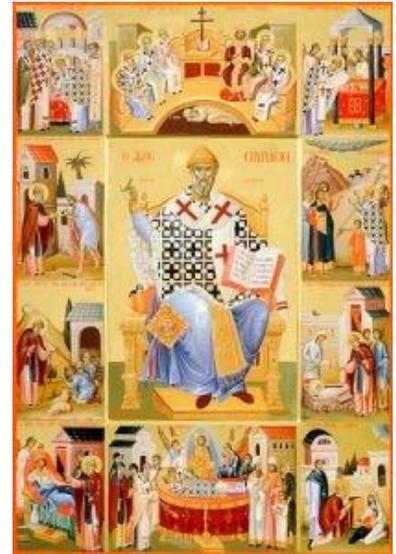
That legacy had fallen upon dark times in recent years, as St. Spyridon's former priest was removed by Archdiocese in 2015 due to an extramarital affair. Around that time, the church's finances were in also in ruin due to mismanagement.

The Archdiocese appointed the Parish Council to help get the church's affairs in order.

"We felt an obligation to help resurrect St. Spyridon, because it was in such a bad shape physically, financially and spiritually," remarked John Psaltos, who serves as the Council Treasurer.

Psaltos grew up in Washington Heights worshipping at the church and attending St. Spyridon School, a K through 8 school which once adjoined the church.

He recalled the turbulence surrounding the church just a few years ago, and the painstaking effort of fixing its finances, saying that the organization needed to rebuild from the ground up. "It was like jumping on a merry-go-round that was spinning out of control. We just pulled together," Psaltos said.



Saint Spyridon was known as "The Wonderworker."



The Parish Council sought to restore the church's interiors meticulously.

The decision was made to close St. Spyridon School, which was no longer profitable, and lease the space to School in the Square, a charter middle school, creating an added revenue stream for the church.

"Once we got a handle on the finances, we started thinking of ways to improve things," stated Psaltos, who said the church is now on stable financial ground. "The framework is here for continued success."

The lifelong connection with St. Spyridon made the church's rejuvenation all the more rewarding for Psaltos.

"It's good to know that something so essential to your life, your identity, is not dead," he remarked.

Founded in 1931 at a time when Washington Heights had a substantial Greek population, St. Spyridon has been witness to the demographic changes within the neighborhood and a lessened demand for the experience of the Orthodox church.

There are currently about 150 active families in the parish, Psaltos said, where it once numbered more than 1,000 families.

"The neighborhood is evolving," said Kazarian, who joined St. Spyridon in 2017. "We're trying to connect the experience of this church with the current community. We welcome everybody."

Kazarian said he is inspired by the recent influx of new residents uptown, especially young professionals and families, and has noticed more young people from the community connecting with St. Spyridon.

"It's a chance for outreach," he stated. "We have to change, we have to adapt to these new realities, but we're very confident we'll adapt for the better."

St. Spyridon conducts a fall festival every November featuring food and a gift bazaar, and also hosts a Sunday school, Bible study, Girl Scouts, a youth group, and women's philanthropic group.

A ballroom, also recently restored, is available for special events.

"We've tried to engage as much as we can with the community, because we are a member of the community," Psaltos said.



It means a lot to see it looking now the way it did when I was a child," said Lydia Vagelos- Callimanis, President of the Parish Council.



Here, the arch near the altar is shown prior to restoration.

The church plans to celebrate the restoration at its Sunday liturgy on October 14, which will feature several priests who once served at St. Spyridon, including the bishop of Boston, who began his career in St. Spyridon.

"It will bring the past, present and the future together — the past priests, the new iconography, and the hope for the future, this church community that is being rebuilt, new people coming in, and all the energy here," said Kazarian.

A special luncheon will be held after the mass in honor of the restoration.

"People are going to be amazed when they see what the church looks like now," Psaltos asserted. "I can't wait to wow people."

St. Spyridon Greek Orthodox Church is located at 124 Wadsworth Avenue. For more information, please visit www.saintspyridon.net.



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The frescos had been peeling.



St. John the Theologian is restored.