

The Greek Orthodox Legacy in America
A Struggle for Relevance in an Unorthodox World

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Many Orthodox churchgoers express, in confidence, that attending services on Sunday, while focused on material success the rest of the week, can lead to a lifelong moral struggle. This is especially true today of younger Greek Orthodox faithful who also find little connection between their behavior in the real world and an archaic liturgical experience they encounter in church on Sundays. I suspect this may be true with other ethnic jurisdictions as well. When the Liturgy is applied to present-day life, nothing is more perplexing than these two opposite forces:

*Discovering the path toward material success
with all its moral trappings...and embracing God
as a lifeline toward redemption and salvation.*

This existential struggle can be found in all faiths; but for the Greek Orthodox in America, there's an added obstacle. The Sunday service (Liturgy) is still conducted mostly in New Testament Greek, a language that's foreign to Greek descendants of the last 50 years, even to those who communicate in common Greek vernacular. In short, the Church that recent generations inherited, continues to ignore, even deny, the need for the English language to deliver the Holy Services.

On the *Moral* side, we know the United States is a capitalist republic where a major objective of life is focused on material success. As children, we are taken to church to maintain our connection to God, but we also go to school to learn the basics so we can discover our gifts and talents. And

we are urged early on to develop and sharpen vital skill sets for a more rewarding future career. We keep hearing adults ask youngsters, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” In fact, for the most part, the pedagogy cycle is focused on preparing young people for a good-paying profession—especially at college and graduate levels.

Cooperation vs. Competition

In free market capitalism, the operating principle is **Competition**, whereas in church life, the operating principle is **cooperation, love for God and one another**. In our daily pursuit, we are drawn toward more aggressive behavior to achieve our economic objectives. When some of us attain abundant material wealth, we earn the admiration of peers, friends and family, even the Church! In the process, competing companies become opponents or rivals, even antagonists. So, in church, we connect with words like *Love, Charity, Sharing, Giving, Good Works*—a stark contrast to the words on the street: *Competition, Deception, Greed, Rivalry, Cunning*.

Many of us who notice the above incompatible word sets, realize how our moral instincts for love and caring can be easily deactivated. So, we attend church on the seventh day to atone for our questionable actions during the other six—knowing full well that, in substance, those actions were morally suspect.

More important, we unwittingly bypass ceremonial spiritual restoration and process our own brand of forgiveness while embracing self-generated redemption. All this is accomplished during the Divine Liturgy and we miss out on its sacred unconditional blessings.

Today, our daily pursuits include ethical conflicts which are settled and ultimately rationalized away for the sake of “peace of mind and soul.” At the church sanctuary we enter that other world and look to God to understand our daily ethical dilemmas and forgive our suspect choices. General wrongdoing is so commonplace today that it cries out for new branding. It’s no longer looked upon as “Doing Wrong,” per se but rather, engaging in a “Necessary Action” supported by overwhelming justification and rationalization. And the word “*Sin*” quietly takes leave from our lexicon and is rendered irrelevant.

Confessions of Immigrant Heirs

Attending church today represents for many Greek Orthodox a temporary respite from a culture whose moral compass has lost its way. We expect to recharge our sacred assets and come away spiritually rehabilitated to face another week of ethical challenges. But the ceremony before us plays to a medieval congregation in the language of that period.

Disconnected from the language of the Liturgy, we experience an unintended consequence: many of us begin to look upon the evolving ethos as pleasant background enhancement, ideal for *personal* meditation. We surrender our conscious self to the ritual of petitions and prayers accompanied by choral sounds and chants. In that realm, our spirit is elevated, evoking emotions reminiscent of an opera, buoyed by a stirring orchestra. Common to both performances: *there is no understanding of the lyrics of the opera or the language of the service.*

Comprehending the Message

During a discussion of this topic many years ago, His Grace Bishop Iakovos of Chicago (of blessed memory), was quick to point out that elevated emotions and feelings generated during a Liturgy inspire a “Mystical Experience.” He said that when Divine Blessings are gifted, they transcend human understanding, even language itself. In other words, the appeal to our sacred instincts through the senses becomes a gateway to the soul. It’s true that during those moments, we are able to draw a measure of forgiveness and redemption on our own; though we can’t be sure if it’s Divine Grace, since we don’t understand the words that filter into our consciousness.

“But that’s what having FAITH is all about,” some may argue. “Belief in God does not require intellectual comprehension and cognitive grasp. A close look at uneducated peasants in small villages around the world who attend church services reveals profound spiritual assets without all the intellect and deep understanding.” His Grace Iakovos pointed out: “Your intellect can bring you only so far; then you approach the symbolic precipice, close your eyes...and submit to the rite, with blind trust and confidence in God.”

But if words don’t really matter, understanding a chant or prayer which can help mitigate a personal moral issue, is sure to escape our ability to learn and become renewed. It’s true, energizing our feelings and emotions through the sights, sounds and smells of the service alone do lift our spirits. But for many today, the feeling wears away quickly, leaving no clear takeaway message. This may explain the rush to “Coffee Hour,” where human contact awakens the spirit of “community” and leads to boisterous

conversations—scant few of them about the service just experienced.

About English Translations

Except for a handful of progressive churches where English is the dominant language, the Greek Orthodox Churches of America (GOCA) continue to deliver the Liturgy in New Testament Greek. Most prolong the service by **adding** awkward English translations to address the “yearning for understanding” from the faithful. Many believe this creates double delivery, consumes more time, and is difficult to follow. Besides, this dual-language practice encounters resistance from those few ethnic purists still in authority who insist on the status quo.

Again, if *understanding* is not essential, why did the Christian missionaries Cyril and Methodius of the 9th Century take great pains to translate Orthodox writings and services into the language of the Slavic people in Eastern Europe?

They must have realized then that they could not rely solely on the sensual approach toward Theosis (a combination of chants, incense, iconography, petitions and prayers) to magically trigger a mystical epiphany that nourishes the soul and draws them closer to God.

Mystical vs. Emotional

The question persists, how can one discern the difference between a *mystical epiphany* and a short-lived *emotional*

experience? Standing at the rim's edge of the Grand Canyon, one is overwhelmed by the awesome sight below which conjures feelings of the grandeur of God's creation. Are these feelings emotional or mystical? Witnessing a glorious sunset at Sanibel Island in Florida can ignite similar sensations. Listening to Pavarotti sing *Nessun Dorma* takes one's breath away. Are these feelings emotional or mystical? Are they lasting or fleeting?

Once, I asked a not-so-religious friend if he was going to Liturgy on Sunday. "I don't think I can make it," he said. "But, I have the video." At first, we both chuckled. But later, I felt a chill when I realized so many "Faithful" relegate Chrysostom's celebration of God and Christ's ministry as just another video competing for attention with other endless sound-bites and events.

"Blessed be the Kingdom of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit" has echoed in Greek throughout the cathedrals of the world for centuries, and one wonders how many take heed and are so moved by the Holy Service that their lives are renewed; especially today's parishioners who are not connected to the service or ethnic aspects of the Faith.

In a culture of distractions, the sacred Christian message, delivered in a foreign language and shrouded in symbolic ritual and ceremony, is met with indifference at best, from younger churchgoers who are weaned on a transparent, sound-bite environment of the modern world.

GOC Losing Its Appeal To Greek Descendants

Today, data reveals diminishing church attendance. The record shows that 50 years ago, the average Greek Orthodox Christian attended church regularly. And in many churches, there was standing room only. Then “life” got in the way, and he appeared every other week, then once a month, followed by an occasional visit at Christmas and Easter services. Sadly, many have withdrawn from the “Chalice” into a personal realm of spiritual management. Is this the Church’s fault for failing to deliver its message in a medium the faithful can understand? Or have we been swept away by stronger headwinds of modernist reforms that have diminished the value of Church in our lives and encouraged a subjective view of “Right and Wrong?”

Today, motivational speakers advise college graduates not to settle for less—to always reach for more; to follow Robert Browning’s counsel: “A man’s reach should exceed his grasp!” They insist that Greed is good, that it inspires ambition. The message is all over college whiteboards and corporate boardrooms, large and clear: “Shoot for the Moon! If you miss, you still land among the stars! And above all, do what *feels* right!”

There must be something in our makeup to pull us away from universal principles and values we were taught as youngsters, and promote self-reflective interpretations of ethical situations. As such, we move away from universal *principles* of behavior and adopt *guidelines* which are subject to change; we move away from the Holy Tradition of the Church and view its furnishings and iconography as mere wallpaper; we hear the unintelligible Byzantine chants and relegate them as “Spiritual Haunts from the Past,” with no lifeline to the present, disconnected and out of touch.

In short, we distance ourselves from God’s message and fashion our own GPS on how to live, in harmony with current social norms. Yes, we are actively lowering the bar—and our secular culture urges us to feel good about it. Regrettably, no one is sounding the alarm, and church leaders are content with delivering the Divine Liturgy in ancient Greek and spreading Hellenism.

Culture and Faith: The Alliance Continues

During the 1990s, Greek Orthodox hierarchy promised an “Ecumenical Council” (sort of) to review the Order of the Church before the end of the millennium. They knew full well that there are dogmatic and doctrinal matters that cannot change, but they also knew that there are habits and customs that have acquired permanent status throughout the millennia that can change to reflect the contemporary ethos without violating the substance of the faith.

It was in this decade that the hierarchy defied any structural changes in governance in response to Orthodox Christian Laity’s (OCL) appeals for transforming the church language to English. As a result, a new Charter was issued in 2003 that declared total control over spiritual and administrative affairs of the Church and maintenance of the cultural agenda. By contrast, Catholic leaders realized 40 years earlier a growing distancing among their faithful. They convened the Second Vatican Council, and among other ecclesiastical reforms, they saw fit to also retire Latin in the early 1960s and deliver the Christian message in English.

Unfortunately, the 2003 GOCA charter also marked an end to decades-long clergy-laity **synergy** that witnessed unparalleled growth in the Church in post-WWII America.

In addition to many churches being built during the 1950s and 60s, a burgeoning young adult movement (GOYA) blossomed across the country and built a solid foundation under church guidance to secure its future. But close observers felt the hierarchy viewed this growth as a threat to the ethnic agenda and a challenge to the provincial brand. Indeed, several years later, it withdrew support from key programs, looked away, and the GOYA movement slowly fizzled. I was in the midst of it...and I watched it happen.

Short-sighted hierarchy held the future of the Church securely in hand but refused to recognize it. It was allowed to slip away quietly in obscurity in deference to promoting Greek Letters and maintaining an ethnic identity. Years later, the Orthodox youth program was resurrected under a different name (YAL), but “the thoroughbred stallions had already fled the barn.”

However, it must be noted that the decade of the 1950s also created a pool of young adults who later contributed valuable stewardship to the Church. It included choir members, athletic directors, parish council members, Sunday-School teachers, as well as chanters. Additionally, several decades later, a few mid-west GOYA leaders who remained, came together and became key players in the formation of OCL in March, 1988.

Well, the Twentieth Century passed, there was no Council, and very little changed. Church membership has declined, but more important, attendance declined even more. As the Greek hegemony of the Orthodox Faith weakens, the future of the Church now rests on its willingness to address two vital issues: **Culture and Faith**. Many fear it may already be too late. In fact, a new charter in the making now, is focused more on jurisdictional and geo-political matters and does not

even address the English language. In fact, it calls for increasing instruction of Greek in church communities.

In Russia, the language of the Orthodox Faith is Russian

In Serbia, it's Serbian

In Greece, it's Greek

In Mexico, it's Spanish

In African countries, it's Swahili and so on.

In America, we expect the language to be English. But it isn't!

The first measurable Greek migration wave to America occurred in the 1890s. The early settlers were concerned about retaining their Orthodox faith and creating schools to maintain customs and language. They allowed the church to develop the latter. So, priests were brought from Greece, and they built churches to maintain their faith and culture. In those years, these actions were not only understandable but necessary. As succeeding generations passed the scepter of the faith to future guardians, many expected a language transition by the 1970s or the 80s; certainly by the millennium's end. But it didn't happen.

Members of OCL urged church leaders to convene a nationwide program and establish protocols for delivery of the Orthodox Faith to Americans in the same spirit as the missionaries of the 9th Century. Under the direction of the archdiocese, the program was to include musicians, theologians, clergy, poets, writers and professors to come together and shape a renaissance of letters and music to transform the Holy Orthodox codex to English. But that initiative never saw the light of day. Many believe if the Church was autocephalous, it would have happened.

The GOCA has remained essentially an ethnic church with a ministry still tailored for Greek people in the diaspora and continues to ignore English-speaking Orthodox in an English-speaking country.

This is most unfortunate because the Orthodox Church is the original Christian Faith with verified Apostolic succession and a continuous ministry for 2,000 years.

Originally called “Eastern Orthodox” with roots in the Byzantine Empire, it was later referred to as “Greek Orthodox” primarily because Greek was the main language of the region. But today, English is still the main language of this region and of Greek descendants. As a close friend recently confided: “In church communities, we communicate in English. Even the sermons are in English. So, why must we worship in a foreign language?”

Looking to the Future

Our rich historic Church legacy claims a sacred mandate to continue into the future. But will it? It hasn't done a good job of relating to the indigenous culture in the last three generations. But there is always hope if church leaders acknowledge an unfulfilled mission for today's faithful: delivery of the Orthodox message in the language of the land. This action doesn't mean that language and understanding alone ensure a meaningful connection to the Faith. But it would be a major step toward welcoming back to the Orthodox family several generations of Greek descendants who have been left out.

Can the Church overcome the headwinds of modernism without shedding the governing “**Homogeneia**” principle (which is no longer relevant) and cement a meaningful bond with future generations in America? Here’s a closer look at the word to which the ministry is still directed.

“Homogenesis—Homogeneity: fellow countrymen; of one race; Greeks in a foreign country—*Divry’s Dictionary*

We are now well into the 21st Century and the future of the Church must adopt a vision beyond maintaining and fostering Hellenism in America; rather, a vision focused on celebrating the Orthodox Faith in the language of the people. Also, church leaders ought to finally observe the Patriarchal condemnation of Phyletism as heresy over 150 years ago. In short, they should finally decide which is more important today: serving an ethnic culture that is slowly vanishing, or growing the Orthodox Faith.

In one of the questions regarding the current charter’s issues to be addressed, the official Archdiocese website statement is:

“...focus should be to meet the needs of the faithful, their children...and grandchildren.”

At first, this sounds encouraging...until we come to a question regarding future opportunities for the youth. The official reply is:

“...it (Church) would increase Greek education to build a foundation for our common culture.”

Clearly, the first reply strongly suggests future generations will be products of Greek education and will celebrate a common **Greek** culture in America.

About Hellenism

Following the last meaningful Greek migration of the 1960s, many have come to believe the task of preserving Hellenic values and Greek letters should have been an objective of a consortium of ethnic organizations—even AHEPA. I believe they would have done a better job, and the Church would have confined its energies to the spiritual needs of the faithful. That’s what churches do!

Besides, too many of us enjoy using the word “Hellenism” a lot today. The word actually evokes a Hellenistic culture of ancient Greece. Among the characteristics associated with ancient Hellenism are Loyalty, Hospitality (Philoxenia), Athleticism, Excellence (Arete), Justice (an eye for an eye), Respect and Honor. Curiously, Worship of One God, Unconditional Love, Equality and Forgiveness were not on the list. Hellenic values are admirable and ought to be taught, but you just can’t cherry-pick the ones in harmony with Christian values and ignore the rest. A classical historian would incorporate ALL the characteristics that define “Hellenism.” So, are we really celebrating Hellenism today? or are we celebrating Greek Nationalism?

Appeal for Reconciliation

The “Greek Church” as it’s still called today, is a misnomer. It continues to be exclusionary by its very name to multi-generational descendants—especially those who marry outside their heritage and do not answer to the ethnic brand. It’s true, many have migrated to the Orthodox Church in America (OCA) and to the Antiochian Church. Still others elected not to attend church at all. Clearly, future ecclesial historians will one day tell the whole story about the fate of the GOCA and address the troubling question:

Was the Greek Orthodox Church formed in the United States as an Enduring Faith for the Ages...or as an ethno-religious support group for Greek people in a foreign land?

We pray, when the shade is finally lifted, the light of understanding shall flood our consciousness, and we may then experience the true Mystical nature of our Faith.

Steven P. Stamatis was born in Greece and immigrated to the United States in 1946. As an 8-year-old, he grew up in Chicago and attended Socrates Greek-American school. The cultural transition to American life set the stage for a lifelong love for the English language and a fascination with ethnic nationalism, philosophy and religion. Later, he studied at Holy Cross Seminary for two years, earned his undergraduate degree at the University of Illinois, and a Masters at DePaul University.

Following a 35-year business career, he taught English in area colleges. He has authored two volumes of poetry: [*Handful of Sand*](#) and [*In Search of Calliope*](#). He also penned three novels: [*The Janissary Factor*](#), co-authored [*Scroll Back*](#), and his latest work, [*The Taming of the Loon*](#). He is a founding member of Orthodox Christian Laity (OCL); served in parish councils, athletic director and choir member; attends Holy Apostles Orthodox Church; and resides with his wife in Addison, Illinois.

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