

LETTER FROM ATHENS

The Myth of Greece Lies Within the Greeks

In 1995, my best friend, Boston schoolteacher Nick Tsiotos and I wrote a biography of the greatest Greek American athlete – one of America's best ever – Harry Agganis, a name that is virtually unknown to many young Greek Americans, just another shame to be piled on many others for our community which has so many hard working people who care about their heritage, but also so many rich people who don't. It would be easier getting a nickel out of a dead man's hand than a contribution from them for a Greek American cause that wasn't a tax write-off or gave them a chance to beat their breasts and proclaim their love for who they say they are. They are the ones who get honored, along with too many celebrities who are Greek American in name only, not people such as Nick Tsiotos. He worked ceaselessly to help raise \$150,000 for a statue of Harry Agganis, which is now in the Sports Museum of New England in Boston, with a replica outside the Agganis Center at Boston University, where he was an All American football and baseball player, and later a rising star for the Boston Red Sox. Apart from a few truly caring philanthropists such as George Behrakis, Christy Papatouy and the late Telemachus Demoulas, and organizations



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honored, the ones who illustrate the distinction between benefactors – who give money to good cause, though not always for good reasons, and philanthropists – genuinely giving people. The former cop the awards, along with too many celebrities who are Greek American in name only, but not people such as Tsiotos and Larigakis and so many others.

The National Herald's recent list of the 50 Wealthiest Greek Americans included a handful of people who do give some of their money to causes and charities and museums and the few Modern Greek Studies programs fading away faster than Cyprus' chances of getting rid of the occupying Turkish army. Together, that rich list's total wealth exceeds \$33 billion, or about what tax evaders cost Greece each year, at the cost of seeing the country they all profess to love sliding into the dust bin of history. Maybe they can name a wastebasket after Herodotus. That list includes someone who gave \$50 million – to his alma mater. Bravo. Maybe that Ivy League school will do something good with it, although probably not endow any scholarships for Greek American students. But couldn't they have done just swell with \$25 million and the other \$25 million given to helping create a Hellenic High School



Nicholas Larigakis, Executive Director of AHI

such as the Logganiko Society, the statue was sculpted inch-by-inch by \$5 and \$10 and \$20 donations from the Greek American community.

Recently, Nick Larigakis, another genuine Greek American who cares about the community – and Greece, unlike the fakers and shakers who rule the country while plundering it of its last remaining treasures, legacy and reputation – was again in Athens and Cyprus. He was escorting the last remaining hope for Greek America to survive as a bloc, young people, 14 college students as part of an annual American Hellenic Institute program that includes seeing parts of Cyprus occupied by Turks who live in homes owned by Greek Cypriots, the vestiges of the 1974 American-and-British supported invasion of the island. Larigakis is President of the Washington-based AHI, and, like Nick Tsiotos, the kind of Greek American whose blood is hot with the passion for who they are and from where their families came, not the curiously cold lust of the rich and politicians for money and power, whose ethnicity has been drained out of them by apathy for their kind. It's the likes of Tsiotos and Larigakis, and former AHI President Gene Rossides, who should be recognized as real Ambassadors of Hellenism, not so many of those put on a pedestal because they made millions building empires of dirt or can sing or dance or act but are empty vessels, not the chalices we need.

The AHI has a number of generous supporters – but not enough of them – just as The National Herald has a hard core of dedicated readers – but not enough of them – because in both cases the richest of our people would rather build a strip mall somewhere or send money to the Church, whose leaders live in million dollar homes and apartments and are chauffeured in luxury cars but haven't built a single Greek American high school.

They are the ones who get

on the grounds of Hellenic College in Boston, or break it up and give to AHI and take out 100 subscriptions to The National Herald to give to students or put on the steps of churches so people can follow what's happening in their community and Greece? It costs about \$50 a year to be a National Herald reader, about half of that to be an on-line reader, the cost of a pizza and a few beers at lunch, but you'd have better luck trying to get Greeks to become Turks than get them to support the paper or AHI. That's a shameless plug and pitch and plea, except it's done in the name of those students too that Larigakis brought to Greece and who were smart enough to see through the chicanery here and are the last best chance for the Greek American community to remain in existence.

Larigakis noted that AHI is propped up by a nucleus of people who care, but you can see the frustration and weariness of his indefatigable work for Hellenism being ignored by those who have the means to help, but won't, written on his face. It's the same look that will one day may adorn the now shining young faces of the students, from schools such as Pennsylvania, Montclair State, Georgetown and Cal-State Fullerton when they, too, look around and see they are among the last standing few Greek Americans who cared enough to come to Greece and return home infused with hope, not fear or worry. That's because they don't know yet what people such as Tsiotos and Larigakis and so many other nameless, faceless volunteers for Greek American causes sadly came to realize, that, as Larigakis wrote on these pages, that too many Greek Americans – and Greeks – just don't care. And that's why one day there may be no AHI and no programs to bring students to Greece, and perhaps not even The National Herald. And who will be to blame? All of us.

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Have Church Leaders Intentionally Missed Chances?

By Evan C. Lambrou
Special to The National Herald

"For if we sin deliberately after receiving knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful prospect of judgment, and a fury of fire which will consume the adversaries"

(Hebrews 10.26-27)

NEW YORK – What an age we live in. We have a governor who openly pushed for (and got) "marriage equality," but who says nothing publicly about rebuilding a Christian church which was destroyed in downtown Manhattan on 9/11, while a powerful public entity under his watch moves methodically to eradicate all traces of that church's memory from its historic setting. We have an Archdiocese that, immediately following the annual spring gathering of the Archdiocesan Council in early May, releases a disingenuous statement about our theological school in Boston – an insipid press release which offers nothing substantive about the school's state of affairs, and nothing period about the plight of Saint Nicholas Church in downtown Manhattan. And we have an elderly Archbishop who brought resolutions concerning the Ecumenical Patriarchate's religious freedom in Turkey before the New York State Legislature this past May, with the support of the NYS Senate Majority Leader Dean Skelos, a person of Greek Orthodox faith and heritage. But neither Archbishop Demetrios nor Mr. Skelos are openly pressing for rebuilding a church right here in New York State.

Before elaborating on the many inconsistencies pertaining to the ongoing plight of Saint Nicholas Church, let me unequivocally state that I firmly believe actions on behalf of the Patriarchate are both necessary and long overdue. I applaud all such efforts, and fully support anything which can help elevate awareness of the Mother Church's struggles in an oppressive environment with a government which is typically hostile to its Christian minorities. But I respectfully disagree with one of the Archbishop's statements during the 69th annual commencement exercises at Holy Cross on May 22. His Eminence asserted that the media is waging a "non-stop attack" against the faith. If the Archdiocese comports itself more confidently and more frequently toward the media, it could convey crucial information more accurately, and thereby perform a valuable service for the Church. That said, with the tenth anniversary commemoration of 9/11 fast approaching, and with the long-awaited reconstruction of Saint Nicholas Church still in doubt, I find it very odd that the Archdiocese interacts with the State Legislature about the Patriarchate, but not about Saint Nicholas Church.

If the Archdiocese really cared about the Patriarchate, a link to the Patriarchate's website would be much more prominently displayed on the Archdiocese website (the current link is at the very bottom of the www.goarch.org homepage), and would be publishing substantially more about the Patriarchate in the Orthodox Observer, the Archdiocese's official newspaper. Moreover, as much as resolutions help educate public servants about the Patriarchate, the reconstruction of Saint Nicholas Church alone would benefit the Patriarchate far more than any set of resolutions adopted by legislators in Albany or Washington.

If Saint Nicholas Church is rebuilt on Ground Zero, where it belongs, an Orthodox Christian presence there would advance the Orthodox Christian gospel immeasurably, and elevate awareness of Orthodox Christian issues among thousands of God-fearing people in a tangible way on a daily basis. It's devoid of foresight to think otherwise. I have stated the arguments for rebuilding the church on Ground Zero (and against the Port Authority of New York & New Jersey's unconscionable obstruction thereof) in previously published pieces, so there's no need for me to restate those arguments here. Unfortunately, the Archdiocese itself, which could much more effectively disseminate those arguments than any individual advocate ever could, has not effectively presented those arguments to the wider public. As a result, the issue sits on a backburner which isn't even burning on low.

There are some in our community who ask, "The Archdiocese has initiated a federal lawsuit against the Port Authority. What more do you want?" A lot more, frankly. It has nothing to do with the strength and soundness of the lawsuit, or with the quality of the hired law firm. The lawsuit seems solid, and the Archdiocese's attorneys appear to be doing a decent job, so far. But the Port Authority has attorneys, too, and all they need do is present some minor points or



St. Nicholas Greek Orthodox Church in New York, which was destroyed in the September 11 terrorist attacks in 2001, stood near the base of the World Trade Center towers, before they fell.

technicalities, and the judge might seize on any one of those to rule against the Archdiocese. Moreover, attorneys also get paid to do as they are instructed to do. If the Archdiocese, which may have painted itself into a corner by opting to openly focus solely on a legal remedy, tells its lawyers to accept a settlement (i.e., some short-sighted payoff) that doesn't stipulate rebuilding the church on Ground Zero, then that's what the lawyers are going to do.

DUBIOUS MOTIVES?

Beyond the lawsuit, the Archdiocese has simply not publicly pursued other options to make sure the church gets properly rebuilt. In light of that, could the Archdiocese be angling for something else? I can't say with certainty that this is the case. But I'm finding no credible evidence that it isn't. As there has been no transparent effort to resolve this issue from a sociopolitical standpoint, the Archdiocese's true motives can be interpreted as somewhat dubious. It doesn't make me feel good to say that. It really doesn't. I honestly wish I could have a little more faith in the whole process, and I don't like to feel suspicious. But the Archdiocese is clearly not keeping the community fully informed about this issue. Outside the lawsuit, in fact, it's not being very proactive, at all. I have identified at least 14 missed opportunities to discuss the church's plight publicly, and thereby actively advance the issue more vigorously. But those opportunities went by the wayside, so my lack of confidence in the Archdiocese's sincerity about rebuilding Saint Nicholas Church is not without some foundation.

• In concert with his brother bishops on the Holy Eparchial Synod of the Church in America, the Archbishop could have easily sent a joint letter to New York Governor Andrew Cuomo, asking for his help. He didn't. Not even a letter? Such a letter would have made a tremendous impact. Is every bishop on the Synod so indifferent to the plight of Saint Nicholas Church? I find that hard to believe.

• The Archbishop could have asked to meet directly – and openly – with Governor Cuomo to discuss this problem. He didn't. Oh sure, the Archbishop and several others met recently with the Governor – behind closed doors – and Mr. Cuomo apparently told them he's waiting for an engineering firm to determine whether or not the parcel promised to the church seven years ago can still accommodate a newly reconstructed church. Notwithstanding the startling possibility that a group of engineers might now tell the Governor it's a no-go – and thereby give Mr. Cuomo an amoral out – there goes the Archdiocese again, meeting with public officials privately. This is almost totally unacceptable. The Governor's disposition toward reconstructing the church is reportedly favorable – in private – but after almost ten years of waiting, a meeting with the Governor about rebuilding a historic church on a national monument should have been held publicly, with more than just a handful of people present. What – or whose – purpose does it serve to meet with Mr. Cuomo privately about this? The only positive aspect to that meeting was the presence of John Catsimatidis. Mr. Catsimatidis helped engineer a very nice deal for the church with the Pataki Administration back in 2002, so it was about time the Archdiocese asked him to re-enter the fray. They should have asked for his help when the Port Authority's attitude turned sour in the spring of 2009. In any case, it's high time Mr. Cuomo indicates his position on the church publicly – like Governor Pataki did – and that's precisely what the

Archdiocese should ask him to do.

• In concert with the Eparchial Synod, the Archbishop could have held a joint press conference, and asked other mainstream religious leaders to stand in solidarity with our community about this issue. He didn't.

• The Archdiocese is a member communion of the National Council of Churches. They could have asked the NCC to issue a substantive statement for public consumption about this issue. They didn't.

• The Archbishop attended the annual commemoration of Greek Independence Day at the White House this past March 25. President Obama himself was present for that. His Eminence recited the usual litany of Hellenic issues. He even cited the need to assist afflicted people in Japan, North Africa and the Middle East. While it's important to indicate that we are both cognizant and deeply concerned about large-scale humanitarian crises, His Eminence did not once openly mention the plight of Saint Nicholas Church during that auspicious occasion. Why not? Rebuilding Saint Nicholas Church on Ground Zero is a Constitutional matter of religious freedom, after all, right here on American shores (for the full list, please visit the web at www.thenationalherald.com)...

More than 75 Roman Catholic professors signed a letter sent on May 11 to House Speaker John Boehner (D-Ohio), who is Catholic, criticizing him for supporting policies contrary to Catholic Church's basic moral teachings. Whether or not one agrees with Congressman Boehner's sociopolitical positions is not germane to this argument. What's relevant here is that our Roman Catholic brethren took an open stand defending their faith and its teachings, while Greek Orthodox leaders have steadfastly failed or refused to do likewise in defense of Saint Nicholas Church. At my urging, Congressman Gus Bilirakis of Florida, Republican co-chair of the House Hellenic Caucus, sent a letter on March 10 to Governor Cuomo and his counterpart in New Jersey, Chris Christie. But the letter only had seven signatures on it. With more than 90 members in the House Hellenic Caucus, 30-40 signatures could easily have been obtained which, in turn, would have made the letter much more impressive and newsworthy. Why didn't Rep. Bilirakis try to obtain more signatures? Was he asked not to do so?

AHEPA Supreme President Nick Karacostas personally assured me months ago that the plight of Saint Nicholas Church would be part of AHEPA's "ever-expanding agenda." At a pro-church rally on Ground Zero last Sunday, June 26, he noted that AHEPA sent a petition with 30,000 signatures to the Port Authority last fall. More than 200 people participated in the long overdue rally, and they deserve high commendation for doing so, but AHEPA didn't inform the community about the rally until five days beforehand. The Archbishop certainly wasn't there, and key elected officials were noticeably absent. While the rally provided some welcome relief to the draught of political inaction, pre-rally efforts seem somewhat lackluster. AHEPA customarily mobilizes more intensively than that. Was AHEPA asked to eschew its efforts to help the church? Conspicuously, the Archdiocese still hadn't posted anything about the AHEPA rally at press time. Where is the Archdiocese's synergy with the community on this issue? I also contacted the Order of Saint Andrew (Archons of the Ecumenical Patriarchate) and the Hellenic Lawyers Association, and asked them to help Saint Nicholas Church. Those requests were met

with deafening silence. Have they been told not to help?

IS IT POSSIBLE?

It's not at all my intention here to denigrate Senator Skelos, Rep. Bilirakis, AHEPA, the Archons or HLA. I'm simply suggesting that – other than a lack of organization – there could be another reason why they haven't gotten more actively involved with this issue, especially since they are naturally inclined to help. I'm sure they all at least checked with the Archdiocese. Were they advised to refrain from getting involved? In the absence of any other rational explanations, what else could it be? I would hate to think this is the case. But people at the Archdiocese aren't stupid, and with so many missed opportunities to advance this noble cause more openly, one has to wonder, is it possible that the Archdiocese has actually asked our community leaders (and others) not to form a more rigorous and comprehensive response? While it makes me feel a bit uneasy, propounding such conjecture hardly makes me unreasonable. When I spoke to senior administrators at NCC headquarters about issuing a statement supporting the reconstruction of Saint Nicholas Church, I was told that, unless the Archdiocese makes an official request, the NCC would likely not get involved, even though this issue concerns the minority Christian rights of an NCC member communion. Perhaps the NCC should still get involved without being asked, but if the Archdiocese quietly asked the NCC to refrain from helping out, this would also amply demonstrate that the Archdiocese has elected to do nothing beyond the lawsuit on behalf of Saint Nicholas Church.

The Archdiocese would probably argue, "There's a lawsuit in place that's complicating matters, so our hands are tied." But unless and until a legal expert concretely explicates how and why this particular lawsuit prevents or precludes community leaders from taking more robust action on behalf of Saint Nicholas Church, the lawsuit is just a convenient excuse not to exercise other patently viable options. If that's the case, why hasn't the Archdiocese acted more forcefully beyond the lawsuit? Why isn't the Archdiocese doing everything it possibly can to ensure the reconstruction of Saint Nicholas Church? Why hasn't it exhausted all of its political resources, capital and connections to exert greater pressure on the Port Authority? Why hasn't it brought all its institutional strength to bear for an eminently winnable fight? What – or who – is holding the Archdiocese back?

In the event that the lawsuit fails to achieve the desired result, what will the Archbishop tell us? "Sorry. We did our best, but the lawsuit didn't work out. The judge was unfair and unjustly decided against us. We have no choice but to accept the Port Authority's terms. At least they're paying us a few million for the church's property."

That would be pathetic. It would also be inexcusable. If money is more important than rebuilding a historic church on a national monument, then some Archdiocese officials have sadly not learned their lessons from the "Westchester Watergate" scandal of the late 1980's and early 1990's, when millions in Church funds were used to finance a questionable land deal that went awry.

If I'm being impatient with this process; if there's a reasonable explanation for why the Archdiocese has not pursued other avenues in addition to the lawsuit, then I ask forgiveness. The lawsuit, though necessary, still a big gamble in my mind – as it puts too many eggs in one basket – but I'm happy to be wrong, and would gladly admit undue (albeit genuine) concern. If the lawsuit prevails and Saint Nicholas church is properly rebuilt onsite, I'll jump for joy. God and Saint Nicholas still have a role to play, though, and we are also expected to do our part responsibly. If the Archdiocese loses its case, then our ecclesiastical leaders won't be able to blame the attorneys or the judge – or even the Port Authority, anymore. They would only have themselves to blame for "working behind the scenes" to the church's detriment, and not doing everything they could have done – on behalf of our entire community of faith – to support a blameless house of worship which deserved far better than it got. They will have no excuse, and for the sake of historical record, that merits being chronicled in our community's oldest and largest newspaper.

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Comments?

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