

Pioneering Priests: Establishing the Greek Orthodox Faith in America
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1904: A Notable Year for the Archdiocesan Cathedral

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1904 was a momentous year. Internationally, the beginning of the Russo-Japanese War in the Pacific hastened the collapse of the Russian Empire, imperiling the lives of tens of millions of Orthodox Christians. Nationally, the World's Fair and the third modern Olympic games in St. Louis preceded the election of President Theodore Roosevelt. In New York, the modern city was taking shape: construction began on Grand Central Station, and the first underground stretch of the subway went into operation. There were also major developments at Holy Trinity, the first Greek Orthodox parish established in New York. In April 1904, Holy Trinity purchased its first building, and later that year a new priest, 43-year-old Father Methodios Kourkoulis (1864-1941), arrived from Greece.

Both developments brought stability to a community sorely in need of it. The fledgling parish, established in 1892, was not the majestic Archdiocesan Cathedral of today. During the first dozen years of its existence, Holy Trinity rented three spaces and was served by ten priests. At the time, establishing a Greek Orthodox parish in America was not easy, but maintaining one proved an even greater challenge, even in the city with the largest Greek immigrant population in the Western Hemisphere. According to the parish history written by Peter T. Kourides (1910-2010), longtime General Counsel to the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese, Holy Trinity was "in total disarray." Michael Contopoulos in *The Greek Community of New York City* claimed "there were few active parishioners. The Church of the Holy Trinity had only 45 enrolled members out of a possible 6,000 Greeks in New York." The primary reason for the membership dilemma was said to have been dissatisfaction with the priest.

Because of the prohibitive cost of Manhattan real estate, no parish could afford to build its own church immediately. Holy Trinity first held services on West 53rd Street in the basement of a Swedenborgian church, which it rented for \$50 a month. From there, it moved briefly downtown to 77-79 Greenwich Street and then to a midtown site. For \$83.33 a month, the parish rented premises at 138 East 27th Street previously occupied by the First Swedish Baptist Church. Services were held there until Palm Sunday in 1904. At that time the parish finally acquired its own building, a one-story stone church of Gothic architecture on East 72nd Street

church between Lexington and Third Avenues. Purchased for \$65,000, it was much larger than the previous sites and in a desirable location. Originally the St. James Episcopal Church, the East 72nd Street church was designed by James Renwick, Jr. (1818-1895) who was also responsible for St. Patrick's Cathedral, which was under construction on Fifth Avenue at the time.

The first services were held at the new Holy Trinity on Holy Monday, April 3, 1904. The priest was Father Zissimos Typaldos, who had arrived in America to take charge of the parish the previous April. He was described by *The New York Evening Post* as having been "a secular teacher and theologian in a college in Athens long before he entered the priesthood." The article added that "although he is about 65 years old, this is his first pastoral charge. It is said that he speaks English well."

In December he was replaced by Mytilene-native Father Methodios Kourkoulis. Before leaving for America, Father Kourkoulis had been appointed by the Ecumenical Patriarch as priest of the St. Nicholas parish in Pittsburgh. When he arrived in New York, the board of trustees of Holy Trinity convinced him, with the consent of the Pittsburgh church, to remain instead in New York. Pittsburgh's loss would be Holy Trinity's gain. On December 14, 1904, Father Kourkoulis celebrated his first Liturgy at Holy Trinity.

According to Peter Kourides, who knew him well, Father Kourkoulis "had an impressive presence. He had a beautiful resonant voice, and he officiated with ceremonial and imposing dignity. He was most articulate. His sermons were well prepared and delivered with stentorian eloquence.... To many of the Greek immigrants of 1904, he quickly became the heroic and majestic figure that they were painfully seeking in their new world. Immediately, Rev. Kourkoulis took total and complete control of the new edifice on East 72nd Street. He quickly raised the money that was required to properly and adequately decorate the interior of the new church. It was by far the handsomest Greek Orthodox church in the Americas in 1905."

As beautiful as the church was said to have been in 1905, Father Kourkoulis had the interior decorations magnificently redone 15 years later. In the early 1920's, shortly after the establishment of the Archdiocese, Archbishop Alexander designated the church a cathedral. It would be the home of the Holy Trinity parish until January 1927, when it was destroyed in a spectacular fire.

In 1938, the 72-year-old Father Kourkoulis was invested with the title of Grand Archimandrite of Constantinople, which gave him privileges at any Greek Orthodox monastery in the world. The honor was conferred by Ecumenical Patriarch Benjamin I, through Archbishop Athenagoras, head of the church in North and South America. At the time of Father Kourkoulis's death in April 1941, he had served Holy Trinity for 37 years, uniting parishioners and contributing significantly to the growth of the parish.