

Pioneering Priests: Establishing the Greek Orthodox Faith in America
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Metropolitan Damaskinos Papandreou (1891-1949)

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Along with hierarchs Meletios Metaxakis (1871-1935) and Athenagoras Spyrou (1886-1972), Damaskinos Papandreou must be considered one of the most important figures in the history of the early Greek Orthodox Church in America. In addition to their service in America, all three went on to achieve international renown. Meletios and Athenagoras were elected Ecumenical Patriarch. Damaskinos was Archbishop of Athens (1941-1949), Regent of Greece (1944-1946), and Prime Minister of Greece (1945). On October 1, 1945, he appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine. Although less well known for his work in America (May 1930 to February 1931), Damaskinos played a pivotal role in the administration of the Church, resolving the divisive political situation that had plagued the Church here for over a decade.

Metropolitan Damaskinos was born George Papandreou, one of thirteen children. As a youth, he excelled as a wrestler and javelin thrower. It is said that when he was a boy he passed a monastery in his native Thessaly, paused before an icon of the Panagia, put his last coin in the offering box, and decided to enter the priesthood. Before his ordination in 1917, he studied law and theology at the University of Athens. The following year he demonstrated skill in mediation when he settled a nationalist dispute between the Greek, Serbian, and Bulgarian monks on Mount Athos.

On December 16, 1922 he was elected Metropolitan of Corinth. In April 1928, Corinth was devastated by a massive earthquake. Metropolitan Damaskinos led an extensive international effort to raise funds for the reconstruction of the city. In August he visited America for the first time in an effort to solicit the help of the Greek-American community. On his tour, he witnessed the political divisions that troubled Greek communities throughout this country. Supporters of former Prime Minister Eleftherios Venizelos (1864-1936) and former King George II (1890-1947) continued to fight their political battles in the Church. At that time, the legitimate Archdiocese was headed in New York by Archbishop Alexander, an avowed Venizelist. His authority had been challenged since 1923 by a rival Archdiocese with Royalist sentiments in Lowell, Massachusetts under the authority of Vasilios Komvopoulos, the former Metropolitan of Mythemne. In 1930, Ecumenical Patriarch Photios II (1929-1935) chose Metropolitan Damaskinos, because of his firsthand knowledge of the American situation, to serve as Patriarchal Exarch to investigate the American situation.

Arriving in New York on May 20, he immediately set to work on his assignment. Six feet four inches tall, Metropolitan Damaskinos carried himself with the dignity befitting the representative of the Ecumenical Patriarch. He skillfully negotiated the roiling political waters of the Church in America. The secular press was considered a major problem, responsible for fomenting much of the partisan division in American parishes. On April 4, 1930, the eve of Metropolitan Damaskinos's mission to America, Patriarch Photios sent a letter to the Greek-American press calling for them "to strengthen [the] work of reconciliation and unity" undertaken by Metropolitan Damaskinos. Initially the press was wary, but the Metropolitan was able to gain their support. Clergy and laity across the country also submitted to his authority.

Metropolitan Damaskinos understood that dramatic action was necessary to rid the Church of political factionalism. His recommendations included the removal and reassignment to Greece of Archbishop Vasilios and of Archbishop Alexander along with two of his three auxiliary bishops. Only Bishop Kallistos Papageorgopoulos of San Francisco (1878-1940) was to remain. Metropolitan Damaskinos also recommended that Athenagoras, Metropolitan of Corfu, be selected to head the Church in America. His recommendations were accepted by the Patriarchate and eventually implemented. Following the resignation of Archbishop Alexander, Damaskinos served as the head of the Church in America for half a year.

During this time he was very active, visiting parishes across the country and attending major events, including the national AHEPA convention and the Epiphany ceremony in Tarpon Springs, Florida. He returned to Greece in February 1931 just prior to the arrival of Archbishop Athenagoras in America.

In 1938 Damaskinos was elected Archbishop of Athens. The election was annulled by Prime Minister John Metaxas, who exiled him to a mountain monastery on Salamis. There, with only his pet dog and goat as company, he devoted himself to prayer and learned to play Gregorian chants on a harmonium sent by a friend from Chicago. In 1941, he returned to Athens and was restored to his position as Archbishop by the Germans, whom he fought with all the power at his command. After a Nazi soldier was killed, he was asked to name which hostages would be shot in retribution. Instead he submitted a list of his bishops with his own name at the head. When summoned by the Nazis to their headquarters, he regularly carried with him a length of rope. When he clashed with the German officers, he would hand them the rope and say: "If you wish to hang me, here is the rope." Another of his bold, defiant statements to the Germans is inscribed at the base of his statue outside the Metropolitan Cathedral in central Athens: "The members of the clergy of Greece may not be shot, they may only be hanged. I beg you to respect this tradition...." Only a man of such courage and fortitude could have resolved the tangled political situation that had troubled the American Church for years. The reorganization of the Archdiocese and restoration of peace paved the way for growth and progress in the decades ahead.