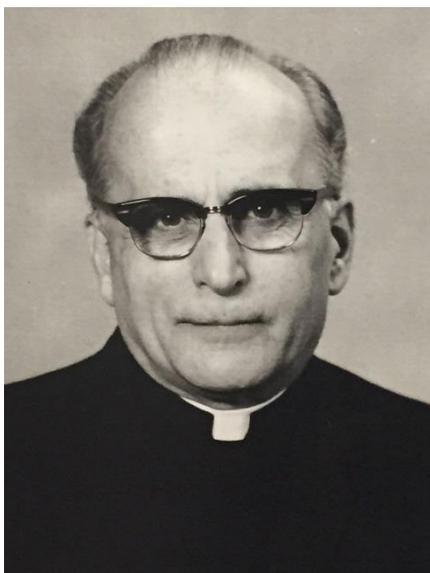


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**The Very Reverend Father George Papaloucas: A Tribute**  
**By Fr. Stavros Ballas, Annunciation Greek Orthodox Church, Chattanooga**



In 1963, Fr. George Papaloucas came to Saint George's in Keene, New Hampshire from Lorain, Ohio for his last full-time assignment. Fifty years my senior (at 57), if you thought Father George came to tiny Saint George's to ride out his last eight years to retirement, think again. Besides Sundays in the altar, Father George indelibly marked us kids in that ministry he once referred to as "our secret school" (το κρυφό μας σχολείο). To us kids, it was just Greek School.

In that little room behind the altar of the church, we all sat at a long rectangular table before getting our own desks the following year. The old clock with the pendulum tick-tocked on the back wall ever so slowly. Two hours lasted forever. We looked forward to getting permission to go to the bathroom, whether we had to go or not, and enjoyed returning in grand style, swinging wildly off the door, since that big old chimney in the middle of the room blocked Father George's view of us as he sat at his desk.

Three times a week for four years in elementary school and twice a week for three years in middle school, Father George used every minute of every two-hour class to transfuse religion, morality, and good manners into our minds and hearts in a relentless effort to flush out all opposing worldly influences at "enmity with God" (James 4:4). He did not bring peace but a sword (Matthew 10:34). He never raised his hand to discipline us (as the priests in our parents' day) but stretched our ears like elastic bands and lashed us verbally. Like God, he was bent on dragging some remnant against its will into the Promised Land in the context of teaching us our Orthodox Christian faith, Hellenic heritage and Greek language.

Father George's methodologies were truly 'old school.' Besides choking on our forced feedings of declining nouns and conjugating verbs, reading a lesson at one class and reciting it from memory at the next was mandatory at virtually every class.

Although it was affirmed that he could speak English, he rarely ever did. We all remember when someone misdialed the church during class. With the strongest Greek accent and finest rolling of his r's, Father George would say *wr-r-r-ong number*. We laughed at his strong Greek accenting of English.

Through the eyes of a child, Father George was a close encounter of another kind. He was someone out of time, as from another world. Even his appearance posed an obstacle. At fifty years my senior, he appeared to us as an old man with no aura of

attraction. As Isaiah prophesied about the Christ, “he had no form or comeliness that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him” (Isaiah 53:2).

Even the periodic removal of his glasses to rub his eyes brought silent screams of horror to our little hearts and minds before we began to chuckle. The permanent indentations left in his eye sockets by the nose pads of his glasses were so pronounced that I clearly remember wondering if he ever took them off even when he slept.

Father George’s impeccable penmanship, neatness and cleanliness evoked in us an unattainable perfection. His use of a ruler to draw a straight line(s) under words he had written was a classic example of this. He made sure each of us had a ruler to use as well. Like most of his generation, you could not impress him. He could not relate with us or we with him. He more characterized the God “who dwells in light unapproachable” (1 Timothy 6:16) than the Jesus who commanded to not hinder the children from coming to him (Matthew 19:14).

His demand to stand at attention when a woman entered our little classroom was truly vestigial. If that was not enough, there was the episode Mrs. Marion Bardis (may her memory be eternal) related to me years later as an adult. After blessing the Bardis home, Father George looked out through the kitchen window into their back yard (no bigger than the space their own house rested on) and he commented how fortunate they were to have enough land to build two houses on, one for each of their two sons when they would grow up and have their own families.

As unvenerable as Father George was in our very young eyes, the Orthodox Christian character (*ethos*) that he painstakingly labored to form in us made him a relic worthy of all reverence and God’s abundant blessings. Unfortunately, youth have no capacity to recognize this fact and just pay attention and learn. As such, levity was our default mechanism during the Greek School years (1964-1971). One time when even levity failed and the more rebellious among us went over the brink, a protest ensued. For purposes of solidarity (if not peer pressure) we all gathered outside on the grassy area behind the church building to be purposely fifteen minutes late for Greek School indefinitely. It was not long at all before Father George discovered our designs. One day, he went through the door that went past the bathrooms and snuck down the old staircase to a door that opened up to the grassy area where we congregated. The simultaneous unlatching of the bolt and flinging open of that door revealed Father George like the Bridegroom coming in the midst of the night (Matthew 25:6). We all fled inside and sat neatly at our desks, except for one of us. I forgot my book bag on the ground and had to go back and retrieve it. With Father George standing ominously over my book bag, I nervously said as I stooped down to pick it up, “Εξέχασα την τζάντα μου, Πάτερ” μωρό For almost eight years of Greek school, Father George looked for any reason to keep me after school to teach me more, and most of the time for simply laughing at the class clowns’ antics. During one postclass episode, unable to grasp his teaching, in frustration I blurted out, “I’m not perfect!” He immediately shot back a la Matthew 5:48, and with a rare usage of his strongly accented English, “θα γίνεις perfect!” (“You will become perfect!”).

After celebrating Holy Week in April of 1972, Father George retired and moved back to the Cleveland, Ohio area (Lorain and eventually Rocky River); but this is not the end of the story.

Like Jacob who struggled with God for many years in a distant land before God blessed him (Genesis 32:26-28), answering God's call to the holy priesthood took me many years and far away from my own home. Although I never strayed from the path, this 'prodigal' did take a long time to 'come to his senses.' In his mercy, God was with me wherever I went and brought me back to complete my studies at the seminary.

After this, God blessed me in a rather profound way. In the person of Father George, it seemed that God was reminding me that just as I couldn't get away from Him then (having to face Father George to retrieve my book bag that I left on the ground as an accomplice in our Greek School rebellion), I could not get away from Him now. This 'prodigal' had to return to his 'father.' This time, our face-to-face meeting would not be as father and "μωρό" (baby), but as father and son.

After ordination to the Holy Deaconate on Sunday, March 8, 1998, we were informed by the Archdiocese that on Saturday, April 4, four weeks later, ordination to the Holy Priesthood would take place at another Saint George's in Southgate, Michigan. We realized we would be driving through Cleveland to get to Michigan and arranged with Father George's daughter Alexandra to pay him a visit, having not seen him since he left Keene almost twenty-six years before in 1972.

At almost ninety-one, Father George had been doing poorly and was in much pain. To Alexandra's amazement, when he heard that we had arrived, he gained an attentiveness he had not had in days. We visited for about an hour and left with the eerie sense, as indicated above, that God had kept Father George alive for this reunion. He soon lapsed into his former condition and declined. Ten days after our visit, on Saturday, April 4, 1998, the priest in Rocky River, Father Peter Metallinos, was visiting Father George. He told Father Peter that his son was being ordained that day. Father Peter gently reminded him that he had no sons but only three daughters. Father George replied that it was his spiritual son from Saint George's in Keene, New Hampshire.

On May 8, 1998, the Very Reverend Father George Papaloucas fell asleep in the Lord. Three days later, this "son," by God's grace, was there with Father Peter to perform the funeral service, to eulogize for the first time, and to bury his spiritual father.

"Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back ..." (Genesis 28:15)

Respectfully submitted,  
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