

Pioneering Priests: Establishing the Greek Orthodox Faith in America

Saint Photios Greek Orthodox National Shrine 2015 Exhibition

www.st.photios.org; TEL: 904-829-8205

Sponsored by Leadership 100

This article first appeared in the January 2013 issue of the Orthodox Observer, the official publication of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America.

Father Demosthenes Chiamardas (1864-1957)

By Dr. William H. Samonides assisted by Dr. Regine Johnson Samonides

Erie, Pennsylvania. "The Reverend Demosthenes Chiamardas, 93, reportedly the first Greek Orthodox clergyman to be ordained in the United States, who came to this country in 1905, from his native Greece, died Thursday."



On June 6, 1957, this brief Associated Press story appeared in newspapers across the country and around the world. Fr. Chiamardas had served from 1918 to 1951 as a priest. He was the founding cleric of Saint George in Massillon, Ohio, contributed to the establishment of Saint John the Baptist in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, and Holy Trinity in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, and served over a dozen other parishes in seven states. His career illustrates some of the travails of early priests, who had little job security and served during economically difficult and politically contentious times. Despite his special place in the history of Greek Orthodoxy in America, Fr. Chiamardas is little known outside Erie, where he served 14 years at the Assumption parish and where his family settled.

Among the early immigrant priests who ministered to the Greek Orthodox, over 150 arrived in America as laymen and later acquired credentials. Demosthenes Chiamardas, who immigrated in 1905 as a 41-year-old married barber, was older than most. He had no formal education and had been taught to read and write by schoolteacher friends in Delihanasi, a village in the Peloponnesus where he also learned Byzantine music and chant from a priest. He was living with his wife and six children in Brockton, Massachusetts, when he was called to become a priest.

On February 10, 1918, at the Syrian Orthodox Cathedral of Saint Nicholas in Brooklyn, he was ordained a deacon and on the following Sunday was ordained a priest by Bishop Aftimios Ofiesh (1880-1966), Bishop of Brooklyn, who was under the authority of the Orthodox Church of Russia. This took place six months before the arrival of Metropolitan Meletios Metaxakis and Bishop Alexander Rodostolou (later Archbishop), who would establish direct authority over Greek Orthodox parishes in America and lay the groundwork for the establishment of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of North and South America. Although Bishop Aftimios would later become a controversial figure, the ordinations he performed were recognized by the Greek Orthodox Church. This was one of several routes to ordination available to early immigrants. Of course, many returned to Greece for training. Others studied at the short-lived Saint Athanasios Greek Orthodox Seminary in Astoria, New York. Some remained in this country, studied intensely on their own, passed examinations, and were ordained by the Greek Orthodox authority in America. Still others were ordained by rival Greek Orthodox jurisdictions. Political tensions between supporters of King

Constantine and Greek Prime Minister Venizelos were causing rifts among the Greek Orthodox worldwide. In America, at the height of these difficulties, Metropolitan Germanos Troianos (1921-1923) and Metropolitan Vasilios Komvopoulos (1923-1931) supported the Greek monarchy and became—for a time—rival centers of authority in opposition to the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of North and South America headed by Archbishop Alexander, who was sympathetic to Prime Minister Eleftherios Venizelos. Fr. Chiamardas had difficulty securing a permanent position in the months after his ordination; however, in October 1918, he was appointed by Bishop Alexander to serve at Saints Constantine and Helen in Vandergrift, Pennsylvania. It was the first of many assignments away from his family. During his ten months there, he encountered problems. In a telegram to Bishop Alexander from Vandergrift on June 23, 1919, Fr. Chiamardas vented his frustration: "Closed the church Sunday. No respect, no rules, no recognition. With respect, tell me what to do. Stay here for nothing or go home."

A few months later he was offered a position at Holy Trinity in Fitchburg, Massachusetts, after the death of the incumbent priest. Fr. Chiamardas signed a three-year contract at \$160 per month plus collections at the sacraments he performed. Although Fitchburg offered an opportunity, Fr. Chiamardas's Royalist sympathies did not sit well with the Venizelos supporters on the Parish Council. He chaired fundraising efforts for a new church for more than a year but, although he was still in town and still under contract, he did not participate in the laying of the cornerstone for the new church in October 1921. Instead, an out-of-town priest with Venizelist sympathies was invited to preside. A month after the ceremony, Fr. Chiamardas was locked out of the church and told his contract had been terminated because the parish was no longer able to pay his salary.

He did not remain unemployed for long. The Holy Trinity parish in Holyoke, Massachusetts, had Royalist leanings and was in need of a priest. Three years in Holyoke were followed by a two-year stint at Saint Sophia in Albany, New York. It was becoming difficult for the children to change schools so often, and in 1927 the family settled permanently in Erie. For Fr. Chiamardas, most of the next quarter century required frequent travel and long absences from his family. During the Depression there were numerous, sometimes lengthy periods of unemployment. He also contended with natural disaster: he was the priest in Johnstown, Pennsylvania, during a devastating flood in 1936 that closed the church for some time. Fr. Chiamardas retired in 1951 and lived for another six years. His funeral was held on June 10, 1957 at Assumption Church, in Erie, with Bishop Germanos (Liamadis, 1884-1965), Titular Bishop of Constantia, officiating.