

Pioneering Priests: Establishing the Greek Orthodox Faith in America

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Father Demetrios Rangos (1853-1923)

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Father Demetrios Rangos was 56 years old when he arrived in New York on August 25, 1909. Although he had come to the priesthood relatively late in his life, he was a veteran priest with the ecclesiastical rank of Ekonomos and 20 years experience serving as a parish priest and administrator in his native Arta and elsewhere in Epirus. Father Rangos would serve the American church for the remaining 14 years of his life. His correspondence preserved in the Archdiocese Archives provides insights into his career. He brought to the many parishes he served an important ingredient: the authority and stability of a seasoned priest. As his obituary stated: “He was pastor of these different churches for short periods, until he was satisfied they were on their feet.”

Father Rangos was one of 50 ordained Greek Orthodox priests who arrived in North America during the first decade of the 20th century. His services were desperately needed. Immigration from Greece and Turkey was surging: nearly 330,000 arrived from 1900-1910, up from less than 40,000 the previous decade. The number of new parishes reflected these higher numbers, increasing tenfold from 1900-1910. The early Greek Orthodox Church in America was an immigrant church attracting few converts from the non-Greek population. In contrast to the church today, which is a more diverse church with urban, suburban, and exurban parishes attracting a growing number of converts, the early church in America was primarily an urban church. Although most Greek immigrants were from rural areas, they settled in ports and industrial cities in the northeast where America’s population—and jobs—were concentrated. This was where most of the early parishes were established. By 1910, all the 20 largest metropolitan areas in the United States except Cleveland boasted Greek Orthodox parishes.

While almost all of America’s largest cities had Greek Orthodox parishes, not all the early parishes were established in big cities. Parishes also emerged in communities where mining and railroad jobs attracted immigrants, such as McGill, Nevada; Pocatello, Idaho; and Pueblo, Colorado. In 1909, Father Rangos became the fourth priest to serve the small-community parish of Saint Spyridon in Sheboygan, Wisconsin. The bustling tanneries and flour and saw mills of Sheboygan were in need of immigrant labor. Cheap rail fares induced immigrants to leave coastal cities and settle inland. As early as 1846, Wisconsin made itself more attractive to immigrants by granting voting rights after only one year of residence. Although somewhat remote, Saint

Spyridon had much to offer the new arrival to America. Religious services were held there as early as 1902, and their first resident priest arrived in 1905. While most parishes had rented or purchased spaces, the Sheboygan community had already built its own church by 1906, one that—remarkably—is still in use. Father Rangos remained there over two years, and the parish is said to have “prospered in every way under his guidance.”

In 1911, he was assigned to Annunciation in Kansas City, Missouri. Both of his early assignments were made by the Holy Synod in Athens, Greece. This reflected a major change in jurisdiction of the Greek Orthodox parishes in America, which took place on March 8, 1908. In response to the uncertainty of Ottoman and international politics, Patriarch Ioakim III (Patriarch 1878-1884, 1901-1912) issued a tome transferring jurisdiction of parishes in the Western Hemisphere from the Patriarchate in Constantinople to the Holy Synod of Greece. Thus when the Head of the Holy Synod, Metropolitan Meletios Metaxakis (1871-1935) arrived in New York on August 22, 1918, Father Rangos contacted him by telegram. Three weeks later, he submitted a resume detailing his credentials. The following year, while in Kansas City, Father Rangos applied to the U.S. Railroad Administration for a Clergy Certificate, which would allow him to travel at half-price fare. He would need it. After Kansas City he would serve nine parishes across the country: Annunciation in Cleveland; Saints Constantine and Helen in South Chicago; Assumption in Chicago Heights; Annunciation in Milwaukee; Assumption in Racine, Wisconsin; Saints Constantine and Helen in Gary, Indiana; Assumption in Pocatello, Idaho; Holy Trinity in Canton, Ohio; and Saint Demetrios in Warren, Ohio. The assignments were brief. This was not uncommon before the establishment of the Archdiocese in 1922, when in spite of the formal authority of the Holy Synod in Athens, priests were often hired and dismissed by unilateral decisions of parish councils. By September 1923, Father Rangos was serving again at Saint Spyridon in Sheboygan. He was, however, approaching 70. After serving two years, poor health forced his resignation. He sought treatment from doctors and hospitals throughout the region, including the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota. On November 23, 1923, shortly after his arrival in Rochester, while walking down a street, he collapsed from a stroke, and passed away. Presiding at the funeral at Saint Spyridon was his successor, Father Dorotheos Papacostas (1877-1949), who had arrived in America only two months earlier. Father Rangos is buried at Wildwood Cemetery. According to his obituary in the *Sheboygan Press*: “During the many years that he was in Sheboygan, Reverend Rangos was a picturesque character. He was known by many residents of this city by the flowing beard and the high silk hat that he wore.” Sheboygan, his first home in America, is his final resting place.