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**Archbishop Dionysios Latas (1836-1894)**

**The First Greek Orthodox Hierarchy to Visit America**

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The July 23, 1893 edition of the *New York Tribune* reported that “Denis Latas, Greek Archbishop of Zante, one of the Ionian Islands, famed for its currants and earthquakes, came as the envoy of the King of Greece, to the Religious Congress at Chicago.... He is of exceedingly venerable and patriarchal appearance, and wears a long, white beard.” Archbishop Dionysios Latas was the first Greek Orthodox Hierarchy to come to America. The fifty-seven-year-old Archbishop was attending the World’s Parliament of Religions, a two-week conference of

representatives from major religions held at the World’s Columbia Exposition in Chicago.

Archbishop Latas came to America as a representative of the Church of Greece. In 1893, there was a much smaller Greek Orthodox presence in North America, with only three parishes. Holy Trinity in New Orleans was established in 1864. Holy Trinity in New York and Annunciation in Chicago were both established in 1892. There were four Greek Orthodox priests: Michael Karides in New Orleans, Paisios Ferentinos at Holy Trinity in New York, Panagiotis Fiambolis at the Annunciation in Chicago, and Kallinikos Kanellas, an itinerant priest who served primarily in the larger cities of the East where there were not yet enough Greeks to sustain parishes.

Greece was also quite different from what it would become. It was about half its present size and did not yet include Crete, Epirus, Macedonia, Western Thrace, or many of the Aegean islands; these territories would be gained in Greek military victories in the coming decades. In 1897, however, during a short disastrous war with Turkey, the Greek military was exposed as poorly trained and equipped. The economy was also in shambles. In 1893, there was a precipitous drop in the price of currants, the primary Greek export, and the country defaulted on repayment of foreign loans. Up to that time, Greek immigration to North America had been negligible: from 1881 to 1890, there were only 2,308 immigrants. In the next decade, however, there would be a sharp increase. The Greek economy was depressed, and many needed jobs, while cutthroat competition among steamship companies lowered the cost of transatlantic passage.

At the time, Americans were unfamiliar with Orthodoxy, and the presence of the Archbishop was an important introductory step. He became a celebrity, attracting attention as a participant in the Parliament but also because of his “exotic” garb. His activities and utterances were widely reported in the national press, and he made a favorable impression wherever he went.

Even though his English was not fluent, Archbishop Latas began a dialogue with Americans, both clerical and secular.

He had been named after Saint Dionysios, patron saint of the island of Zante, or Zakynthos. A cleric of considerable international experience and education, he had long dreamed of visiting America. Educated at the Theological School of the University of Athens, he had studied in the Holy Land, France, Germany, and England, and spoke several languages. In Greece, he was well-known for his oratorical skill and fine sermons. He was held in high esteem by American Jewish leaders for protecting Jews from persecution in Russia and other areas where the Orthodox Church held sway. In 1870, he was in Rome to observe the First Vatican Council. This experience would prove useful in America, where he was frequently asked about the possibility of a union between the Orthodox and Catholic churches.

The Archbishop was a man of great intellectual curiosity. Among his many adventures in America was a late-night visit to the offices of *The New York Herald* where, together with his Deacon and the Greek Consul, he watched the presses print the morning newspaper. He explained that he had never seen “so complete and multiform an establishment.... I am glad to have witnessed so marvelous an achievement of the human mind.” The *Herald* was his favorite American newspaper: it had raised funds for victims of the earthquake that devastated Zante in April 1893.

In addition to attending the conference, during the six months he spent in America, the Archbishop celebrated Liturgy at the Annunciation in Chicago and at Holy Trinity in New York. He referred to Holy Trinity as “the little Greek church in this city,” reminding him of “the little churches I preached in years ago [in Greece] when I was an Archimandriti.” He saw the major sites of New York City and Washington, D.C., as well as the tourist attractions of Saratoga Springs and Niagara Falls. He met with high officials of the American Episcopal church and attended the 110th annual convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church of the Diocese of New York. At the end of his American travels, he baptized a child in the Russian Orthodox Church in San Francisco.

A quarter century would pass before the next Greek Orthodox Hierarchs would come to America. Metropolitan of Athens, Meletios Metaxakis, along with Bishop (later Archbishop) Alexander Rodostolou, arrived in August 1918. Metropolitan Meletios came as the head of the Holy Synod of Greece, which had jurisdiction over the Church in America. The Church had grown enormously since 1893. With increased immigration from Greece and Asia Minor, more than one hundred parishes had been established throughout North America.

For Archbishop Latas, however, visiting America was only the first leg of his journey. Just ten years after the publication of Jules Verne’s novel, *Around the World in Eighty Days*, traveling around the world in relative comfort on reliable transportation was a novelty that captured the Archbishop’s imagination. After touring America, this forward-looking Hierarch would set off to see the rest of the world.