

Pioneering Priests: Establishing the Greek Orthodox Faith in America
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Father Stephanos Phoutrides and His Remarkable Family
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Among the many talented priests to serve our Church in the first half of the 20th century, Father Stephanos E. Phoutrides (1891-1946) was exceptional. Educated on three continents, he studied at theological seminaries in the Holy Land and in the United States. His secular education in America was no less stellar, attending Mount Hermon, a top New England preparatory school, before earning his B. A. in English from Yale University in 1917. As the first Ivy League university graduate to be ordained a priest of the Greek Orthodox Church in America, he is said to have been one of only two priests in the Archdiocese at this time who was fluent in English. After his ordination in 1923, he served briefly as secretary—and English tutor—to Archbishop Alexander, presiding hierarch of the Church in the Western Hemisphere. Father Phoutrides served the Church in this country for 23 years and was fully bilingual a generation before the first students graduated from Holy Cross Theological Seminary. He not only

sounded different, he looked different from other priests: he was clean-shaven years before the practice became common. In many ways, he was ahead of his time.

Exceptional achievement ran in the family, who were from the island of Ikaria. Fr. Stephanos was the youngest of four sons of Evangelos Phoutrides, an international trader and ship captain, and his wife Aspasia. Between 1905 and 1925, Father Stephanos and his brothers Neilos (1868-1933), Michael (1881-1944), and Aristides (1887-1923) came to America, each distinguishing himself in his field of endeavor.

Michael was the first Phoutrides to arrive. He worked in California, then studied at the Kellburg Institute in Chicago and became a doctor of chiropractic medicine. Younger brother Aristides arrived the following year. Only five years later, in 1911 he graduated from Harvard College with Highest Honors in the Classics. A brilliant scholar, among the many honors he received as an undergraduate was the coveted Bowdoin Prize, awarded to students for excellence in literary composition. Given annually since 1790, the long list of Prize winners includes Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry Adams. Four years later, after studying abroad, he received his

doctorate from Harvard, where he taught in the Classics Department until accepting a short-term appointment at the University of Athens after World War I. As early as 1916, he was lauded as “one of the great poets of the future” in the American press. Returning to the United States in 1921, he taught at both Harvard and Yale. His promising career was cut short when he died at the age of 35 in 1923. Neilos, the oldest brother, was the last to arrive, coming to the U.S. as an ordained priest in 1925. He served in America for eight years at parishes in Warren, Ohio; Tulsa, Oklahoma; and New Castle, Pennsylvania. In 1933, just weeks after visiting his mother in Greece, he suffered a fatal heart attack.

During these family tragedies, Father Stephanos continued to serve the Church at Holy Trinity in Waterbury, Connecticut (1923-1924); St. Demetrios in Seattle (1924-1932); Ascension in Oakland (1932-1934); Annunciation in Kansas City (1934); and Holy Apostles Saints Peter and Paul in Haverhill, Massachusetts (1934-1935). In July 1935, after an absence of three years, he was recalled to St. Demetrios, to continue the innovative programs he had instituted during his first stay there. Although supported by the majority of parishioners, he was opposed by a small group that objected to his strict discipline and to his use of English. Language was then, as it is now, an issue that stirs the passions of many of the Greek Orthodox faithful.

Father Stephanos wrote about how he expected his parishioners to conduct themselves:

I do not allow smoking and drinking of beer, wine, and liquor in the premises of the church; I require order and discipline within the church proper during the hours of services. I do not administer the holy communion at all times and to persons of all ages before the appointed time in the service of the Divine Liturgy. I request the women and young girls to approach the Holy Chalice with unpainted lips.

He was equally clear about why he felt it important to communicate in English as well as in Greek:

I use English in Sunday School for the benefit of the child and occasionally in the sermon and in some prayers in the sacraments of baptism [and] marriage and in the burial service for the benefit of young people and adults who have little or no knowledge of Greek. I have never, however, omitted or neglected the use and instruction of Greek [and] I have always taken special pains for the instruction of Greek both to children and to adults.

In 1939, although his contract was terminated, a considerable number of parishioners who supported him left to form the new parish of the Assumption. Father Stephanos served as their priest until his death in 1946 at age 54. Archbishop Athenagoras sent a letter expressing his "deep regret and grief for the loss to the Church of one of its worthiest and able servants." With his passing, the last of the remarkable Phoutrides brothers was gone.