

# ST. NICHOLAS - GROUND ZERO

## National Shrine – Our Dwelling in Christ

As the 42<sup>nd</sup> Archdiocesan Clergy Laity Congress draws near, the presence and then potentialities of St. Nicholas National Shrine at Ground Zero grow ever greater. The theme of this congress – “The Orthodox Christian Family: A Dwelling of Christ and a Witness of His Gospel,” speaks with particular resonance for every parishioner and community across our National Church.

With all the parishes – more than 550 of them and each one a “Dwelling of Christ,” and with all our parishioners – hundreds of thousands in every one of the 50 states, and each one alone and together with each family a “Dwelling of Christ,” the St. Nicholas National Shrine will become a visible sign of the oneness and unity of our Church, which is our shared “Dwelling in Christ.”

This small temple, gloriously rendered anew in an elevated green-space directly across from the 9/11 Memorial, will surely become for the Greek Orthodox Faithful in America a unifying vision of what the Church means for us, and what the Church means for the world.

As a parish of the Archdiocese, it will function in many ways as every parish does: with a rich liturgical life filled with the grandeur of Orthodoxy, with stewards, assemblies and a parish council, with educational and social activities; and yet, it will mean so much more.

As a national shrine of the Archdiocese, it will be able to have a national roster and stewards nationwide. There will be a groundswell of appropriate pride in the fact that the only religious institution that stands at the epicenter of the history of the twenty-first century is a Greek Orthodox church. The responsibility is truly awesome. The opportunity is virtually limitless.

This is where the scriptural watchword for this congress speaks directly to this: *From God every family in heaven and on earth is named* (Eph. 3:15)

We have a marvelous challenge as a local church, really—a “super-minority” here in the vast American landscape, to bear witness uniquely as only Orthodox Christianity can do. Our Faith is not built on exclusion, but on inclusion. It is a-true to the original meaning of the word-catholic faith, καθ’ ὅλους, “for everyone.”

As a national shrine, St. Nicholas will be open to all people, whether believer or unbeliever. In a world where so much division is caused by religion, St. Nicholas will be a space of refreshment and acceptance, bearing witness to the love of God for all people. Within the physical structure, there will be a bereavement/meditation space open to anyone who wishes a quiet moment “κατ’ ἰδίαν” (apart) as the scripture says (e.g. Matthew 14:13, Mark 9:2)

The inspiration for this “nondenominational bereavement center” comes from a simple fact: that when our nation was attacked in this outrageous act of terror and hatred, three thousand of our fellow human beings were mercilessly



Rendering by Santiago Calatrava.

murdered. The horrific deaths of the innocent victims of that tragic day were brought about by a hatred fueled by perverse and perverted religious views. The inclusion of the bereavement space is a direct response to bear witness not only to the heroic love of the responders who gave their last measure to save others, but to the fact that it is altruistic love that is at the heart of genuine human religious experience. St. Nicholas is being rebuilt not only for the sake of the souls of those who perished that day, but as much for the sake of the soul of our nation and that of the world.

The inclusivity of the bereavement space within the structure that houses a particular house of worship signals the American democratic and religious ideal that the practice of one’s own beliefs in no way hinders the beliefs of another. In fact, quite the opposite, it welcomes the belief of another. Thus the bereavement space is non-denominational and truly interfaith.

From the beginning of the process of rebuilding St. Nicholas in the aftermath of September 11, 2001, as the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese engaged with civic authorities about the treatment of the destroyed site of the St. Nicholas Church and the discussions concerning the rebuilding of the Church, from the earliest stages, there was always a plan to include this bereavement/ecumenical space within the design for the new church structure.

This common vision of then Gov. Pataki and Archbishop Demetrios remained in place until the final agreement was reached on Oct. 14, 2011 with the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey. At that momentous signing of the accord, Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo said: “We lost St. Nicholas Church in the destruction of September 11 and for too long its future has been uncertain. Rebuilding St. Nicholas Church, with a nondenominational bereavement center, is not just good news for the Greek Orthodox community, but for all New Yorkers. With this agreement, we are continuing New York’s collective healing, restoration, and resurgence. Now we are finally returning this treasured place of reflection to where it belongs.”

“It is indeed a great privilege and awesome responsibility to be present at Ground Zero. This Greek Orthodox National Shrine will provide non-sectarian space for reflection and meditation through the bereavement space.

The entire structure, including the nave, bereavement space (2<sup>nd</sup> floor) and social hall (3<sup>rd</sup> floor) will have programs of remembrance designed specifically for the surviving family members, inter-religious educational programs, cultural events and an integrated synergistic overall program of activities, exhibitions, etc., that are commensurate with the dignity and solemnity of the site.”

This usage of the St. Nicholas National Shrine will give it a profile that no other Greek Orthodox Church in America could ever have. When compared with the other national shrine of the Archdiocese, St. Photios in St. Augustine, Fla., the implications become clear. St. Photios, in the relatively small city of St. Augustine attracts a remarkable 100,000 visitors per year.

This wonderful and very small structure, the vision of Archbishop Iakovos

and the dream of many thousands of faithful Greek Orthodox around the country, preserves the memory of those first Greeks to America, indentured servants who ultimately did not survive.

Yet, St. Photios in St. Augustine continues to tell their story, and the stories of the immigrations of generations of Greeks to America. Our whole Church should be proud of this, our first national shrine!

Now, add two zeros to that number of 100,000, substitute New York City for St. Augustine and you begin to see the potentialities for St. Nicholas.

And the stories that it will tell are steeped in our theology of love, our history of sacrifice, and our mission of peace. This is a shrine for every family in heaven and on earth! It is a shrine for those who died and are now at rest with God in heaven. It is a shrine for the families who survived and need the comfort and solace that only the Church can bring.

And it is a Shrine for all families of the world who so need the Church to embrace them, as the Lord Jesus Christ reminded us all, when He opened the Book of the Prophet Isaiah and read from the following:

*The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me; because the Lord hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; he hath sent me to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound; To proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord, and the day of reckoning of our God; to comfort all that mourn; To appoint unto them that mourn in Zion, to give unto them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness; that they might be called trees of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, that he might be glorified. (Isaiah 61:1-3)*

### To donate

to the St. Nicholas at Ground Zero Fund, make checks payable to:

**Greek Orthodox Archdiocese**

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8 East 79<sup>th</sup> St., New York, NY 10075.