

# ST. NICHOLAS - GROUND ZERO

## A Tale of Three Churches: Part 1

*First of two parts*

On September 11, 2001, in an act of terror and hatred, our nation was attacked and three thousand of our fellow human beings were mercilessly 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. In the face of the horror of that day, we all witnessed the heroic love of the responders who gave their last measure to save others. This altruistic love is at the heart of the rebuilding of St. Nicholas Church at Ground Zero, a national shrine of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America.

St. Nicholas is being rebuilt as an act of inclusive love – not merely as the parish destroyed that fateful day, but as a sign of love and hope for every person who will pass by and see its glimmering dome. Indeed, St. Nicholas is being rebuilt for the sake of the souls of those who perished that day, and for the sake of the soul of our Nation and that of the world.

As is well known but seldom mentioned, there are over 1,100 persons who died that day whose earthly remains were never recovered. Their families go on without the closure of burial of any kind. And in the museum that is across from the site of St. Nicholas, the unidentified remains (over 9,000 fragments) of those lost on 9/11 will be interred. As Anemona Hartocollis wrote in the *New York Times* in April of 2011:

“In one of the haunting legacies of the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center, the remains of 1,123 of the victims, 41 percent of the total, have not been identified, leaving many of their relatives yearning for closure. At the same time, nearly 10 years later, 9,041 pieces of human remains — mainly bone fragments but also tissue that has been dehydrated for preservation — are still being sorted through by the city’s medical examiner for DNA, though the last time a connection was made was in 2009. . . . The plan at the World Trade Center is for the remains to be invisible and inaccessible to the public, museum officials said; an adjoining room will be available to victims’ families for contemplation and grieving. Although people would have to enter the museum to get to the remains, the remains will technically be in the custody of the medical examiner, so that they may be removed for future testing.”

This decision has a great impact on the significance of St. Nicholas at Ground Zero.

The most famous cenotaph (empty tomb) in the world is the Anastasis in Jerusalem, more widely known as the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Within this site, most



Rendering by Santiago Calatrava

sacred to Christians around the world, are both the hill of Golgotha where our Lord Jesus Christ was crucified, and the All-Holy and Life-giving Tomb, where He was buried. But as the Angel cried to the Myrrh-bearing Women two thousand years ago: “*He is risen! He is not here!*” (Mark 16:6). Thus the Tomb of the Lord is an empty tomb, a cenotaph, the most famous cenotaph in the world.

It is this message of the Resurrection, the hope of eternal life in Christ, which St. Nicholas Church at Ground Zero will bring to life by its presence and witness. The Church may be small but it is very impressive in its stone-clad exterior, as opposed to the glass and steel that surround it.

In fact, St. Nicholas will be the only religious commemoration within the rebuilt 16-acre World Trade Center site. Therefore, the whole Church structure will serve as a cenotaph for the memory of those who, by an act of hatred and violence, were denied not only their lives but even the dignity of burial. Our Church will stand at Ground Zero as an affirmation that religious faith – understood in its truest meaning – is creative and loving, not destructive and hateful.

Therefore, the rebuilding of St. Nicholas

Church at Ground Zero is a remarkable opportunity for the entire Archdiocese to bear witness to our strong faith, our future hope and our deepest love.

It is also an awesome responsibility that we can all share as the building progresses over the next two years.

Because St. Nicholas Church was part of the destruction of that day, it is also part of the restoration.

With a quiet dignity and abiding presence, St. Nicholas Church at Ground Zero will preach the most fundamental truth of our precious Orthodox Christian Faith – the Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ and therefore our resurrection as well, night and day without pause.

The Church will stand in the light of the Resurrection for all to see and behold the goodness of God.

As beautiful and moving as the National September 11 Memorial and Museum are beautiful and moving are, they are by definition and purpose secular. Together they

comprise nearly half of the World Trade Center site; the other half is filled with commercial space, skyscrapers and the transportation hub. The Memorial itself – directly across from the site of St. Nicholas – contains two large waterfalls and reflecting pools, each about an acre in size, set within the footprints of the Twin Towers.

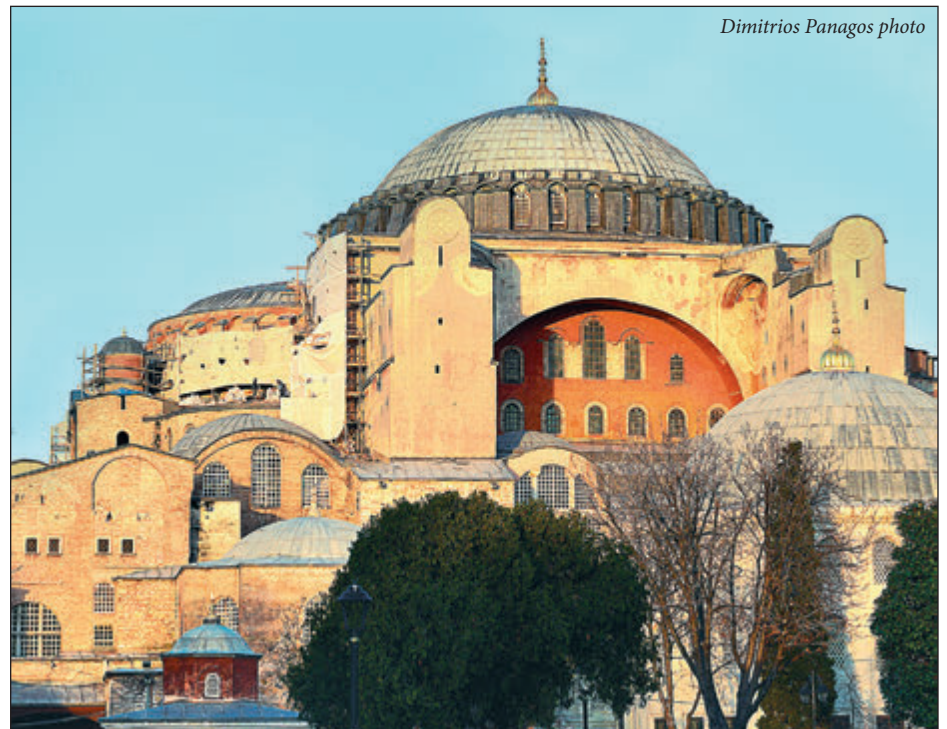
On bronze parapets that surround the pools the names of the nearly 3,000 people killed in the terrorist attacks of 9/11 are inscribed, as well as those killed in the 1993 World Trade Center bombing. Even the memorial inscription that will be inscribed on the wall in the Museum in front of the victims’ remains is secular. It is from the “Aeneid” of the Roman poet Virgil (died 19 BC). It reads: “No day shall erase you from the memory of time” (“Nulla dies unquam memori vos eximet aevo” Book 9, line 447).

So as eloquent as these sentiments are, and as moving as the museum and the memorial are, it will be up to St. Nicholas Church to provide the space for spiritual, worshipful and liturgical acts of faith, private and public. As a Greek Orthodox parish, the full cycle of services will be held. But as a welcoming haven of spiritual wealth and health, the church building – the nave, narthex, meditation/bereavement space, even the social hall, will be a vital and indeed necessary component of the new World Trade Center.

The wounds of 9/11 are not so old that the encounter with the harsh memory of that tragic day will not propel visitors of all faiths and cultures to seek solace and comfort within St. Nicholas. It is our privilege to be present at Ground Zero.

We were there long before the tragedy and before even the thought of the Twin Towers. And we will be there long into the future, a cenotaph honoring and remembering those who died that day. And bearing witness to the Resurrection of the dead, and the life of the age to come.

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