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Faith

THE SUN, LOWELL, MASSACHUSETTS



Father Anastasios Coulouras, pastor of St. George Greek Orthodox Church in Lowell, anoints a parishioner during the Service of Holy Unction on Holy Wednesday this week, one of the observances preceding Orthodox Easter tomorrow.

SUN/JULIA MALAKIE

Father Coulouras comes home

Chelmsford priest celebrates first Easter as pastor of flock at St. George Greek Orthodox Church in Lowell

By DEBBIE HOVANASIAN
Sun Correspondent



Coulouras presides over the Orthodox Holy Week services this week at St. George Greek Orthodox Church of Lowell, it will mark his second Easter with the parish.

Yet he looks at it with special significance. It is his first after being officially named by the Greek Orthodox Metropolis of Boston as the presiding presbyter — the pastor — on a permanent basis.

Coulouras is a Lowell native whose father supported his wife and six children by working in the Lowell mills during the Depression years. The St. George assignment has allowed Coulouras to come back "home" after serving the Greek community in Laconia, N.H., for several years from his home base of Chelmsford. He also served temporarily at Holy Trinity in Lowell until a permanent pastor was named.

"I'm excited because I live here and I grew up in the area. I feel a priest should live in the community," Coulouras stresses.

Among the many things the small Greek community of St. George can count on from the well-liked "Father Ernie" is a wealth of life experience and the wisdom and knowledge that it brings.

Less than 10 years ago, at age 67, Coulouras, a father of three sons and a grandfather to three, was ordained to the priesthood at Transfiguration Greek Orthodox Church in Lowell, where he and his family had been members for 25 years.

In addition to raising his family with his wife, Presbyteria Helen (Triantafilou), Coulouras' accomplishments leading up to his ordination are numerous and far-reaching. They also speak of his passion to serve others, particularly children and the elderly.

"I love working with children and the elderly the most," says Coulouras, now 76. "They are similar in the way that they love to talk and share."

Certainly, children have been one of the main beneficiaries of Coulouras' life's work prior to the priesthood.

As he reminisces about his



Father Anastasios Coulouras, pastor of St. George Greek Orthodox Church, anoints parishioner Nikki Tsiklis, 17, of Lowell, as her sister Stacy Tsiklis, 15, waits in line at the Service of Holy Unction on Wednesday. Coulouras hopes to bring more young people into the church.

four years in the Navy after his 1947 graduation from Lowell High School (he entered the Navy after working at Boott Mills and realizing it wasn't for him), Coulouras lights up when sharing the story of inviting orphans on board American aircraft carriers.

"They were from France, Italy, Germany, Spain, Africa. We'd give them lunch and they'd see a movie in the movie theater, and we'd give them a beautiful little toy to take home," he beamed.

For five years during the 1970s, Coulouras was the director of Camp Paul for Exceptional Children (now the Paul Center for Learning and Recreation), a camp in Chelmsford for children with special needs. Coulouras helped raise funds to build a handicapped accessible in-ground pool, solicited help from Nashoba Valley Technical High School to build cabins to replace tents, established the first overnight camp, and was one of four volunteers to put their own homes up for collateral in order to purchase additional property for the camp.

After three years as director, Coulouras' youngest son, "Johnnie," was born with Down Syndrome. He went on

to attend Camp Paul until age 21 and today, at age 34, faithfully serves at the altar with his father.

Four degrees from Boston University in education, counseling and child psychology, and a stint as a college chaplain, allowed Coulouras to reach out to countless other youth from several communities over the years. For decades, he was a familiar face in the Chelmsford school system as the psychologist/counselor for elementary and junior high.

Coulouras retired from Chelmsford at age 64 and planned to open up a private practice, which is typically lucrative, he said. "But my wife said to me, 'you're not really happy doing that, are you?'"

Helen knew exactly what her husband wanted to do: work in the church, Coulouras said.

Inspired by his brother-in-law, the Rev. Nicholas Triantafilou (now Chancellor of the Archdiocese of North and South America), Coulouras had attempted to become a priest while in his 40s. Yet family and career demands, including medical emergencies for John, prevented him from finishing the daytime courses required for ordination.

Upon retirement, with his wife's support, Coulouras enrolled in Brookline's Holy Cross Theological Seminary, even taking a dorm room to eliminate the commute to and from Chelmsford after long days of classes.

"I was like the father figure there," he said with a laugh. "Even my professors were younger than me."

After three years at the seminary, Coulouras was first ordained a deacon, then a priest in 1996.

Today, as "Father Ernie" shows off the beautiful, magnificently domed edifice of St. George (originally built as a Unitarian/Universalist Church in 1899), his energy and enthusiasm for his church and its future belie his age.

The young are in his plans once again, as he is encouraging Greek youth to get more involved. And he wants to fill the rounded wooden pews of St. George on Sundays, much like they are at Holy Week, baptisms and funerals.

"My dream is to revitalize the church," he said. "You don't like to see empty seats."

To do so, he has plans to be around for a while. "God willing, I'll be here as long as I can," he smiled.

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