

Honors World Religions
25 April 2006

Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Cathedral
1200 Robert E. Lee Boulevard
New Orleans, LA 70122

The Response to Hurricane Katrina
by the Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Cathedral,
New Orleans, Louisiana

Jonathan Hoffmann



Greek Festival, 28 May 2006. Photo courtesy of Catherine Wessinger.

Hurricane Katrina has affected the New Orleans area profoundly and while aid has come in many forms, for the members of the Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox community the main source of hope has been each other. As is the case of all natural disasters, faith communities are impacted greatly and serve as a safety net for all. This safety net was enacted at an early stage at Holy Trinity as the community rallied together to prepare the Cathedral and the Hellenic Center for the visit of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew on 7 January 2006. It was through the congregation's deep sense of community and the visit of Patriarch Bartholomew that the Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Cathedral has achieved the level of reconstruction it has.

GREEK ORTHODOXY

The roots of Greek Christianity are akin to all other Christian denominations; however, by the year 200 C.E. there were two main schools of thought: Greek Christianity and Latin Christianity (Harakas 2005 [1987], 6: 3656). As time passed tension grew between these two forms of Christianity over a discrepancy in the view of *filioque*, a statement that proclaims that the Holy Spirit comes from both God the Father and God the Son; there was also an issue of how much power should be held by the pope. A series of rifts ensued culminating in the Great Schism, which split the churches of Constantinople and Rome permanently. The Schism was based loosely around the aforementioned issues although today it is understood to have been more of a battle of egos between the leaders of the respective churches (Boojamra 2005 [1987], 12: 8155).

Today, the Greek Orthodox Church teaches that to be Orthodox is to be part of a community that believes in a living God. While the view of the church as an organization is acceptable in the sense that the church can be used for social or political activism, the Greek Orthodox Church should be viewed as an entity, one fluid being (Constantelos 1982, 58). In its practice it tries to stay true to the teachings of Christ and to the original interpretations of his disciples. The Church also considers itself to be the original Christian Church kept true through following the Holy Scriptures and sacred tradition (Constantelos 1982, 60).

HISTORY OF HOLY TRINITY CATHEDRAL

Nicholas Benachi was the main patron supporting the founding of the Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox community. He allowed worship to take place at his house until he sold a piece of his property to the church community in order to build a proper house of worship in 1866. This was the first Greek Orthodox church in the Americas, and in 1909 the state of Louisiana issued a charter to the Eastern Orthodox Church of the Holy Trinity. The original church was demolished and a new one reconstructed in its place; this new church was given the honor of being consecrated as a Cathedral in 1960 (Holy Trinity [2006]).

The Greek community of Holy Trinity started a Greek Festival in 1974. This festival, which celebrates the Hellenic heritage of the community, has taken place every year since its inception. In 1976 the property of the church was sold and in 1980 the Hellenic Center

was built at the current address on Robert E. Lee Boulevard. In 1985 the Cathedral was built that stands there today (Holy Trinity [2006])

On 4 February 2001 a special honor was bestowed upon the church by the consecration of the new edifice presided over by His Eminence Archbishop Demetrios of America, His Grace Bishop Alexios of Atlanta, His Grace Bishop John of Amorion, Reverend Father Anthony Stratis, who is currently the Dean of the Cathedral, and various other past Deans of the Cathedral, namely Reverend Father William Gaines, Reverend Father Demetrios Katerlis, Reverend Father Nicholas Pastrikos, Reverend Father Nicholas Jonas, Reverend Father Constantine Mersinas and Reverend Father Teodor Bitá (Holy Trinity N.d.).

IMPACT OF KATRINA ON THE CONGREGATION AND ITS MEMBERS

Visiting the Greek Orthodox Cathedral at Robert E. Lee Boulevard and attending a Divine Liturgy service there can be misleading. It seems as though nothing occurred, as if Hurricane Katrina simply passed by the Cathedral like a tornado destroying one house and simply hopping over another. According to Father Anthony Stratis, the Cathedral has been described as an “oasis” in its neighborhood. This assertion seems apt. There are healthy-looking flowers in the front, well-kept bushes all around and not a single remnant of a flood line on the outside of the church. The inside of the Cathedral is in similar fashion as all of the murals and icons are undamaged and appear as vibrant as they were at their creation. Overall, the impression is one of business as usual (Hoffmann 2006).

Once the shock of the pristine nature of the grounds wears off, one takes note of the affects that Hurricane Katrina took. The Cathedral can hold three to four hundred people comfortably; when I attended service, there were at most forty in the pews. After Liturgy, most people talked about gutting their houses, making minor repairs, or having to face rebuilding completely. Of the members who have decided to return, the majority must rebuild. Some discussed the daily dealings of life and tried to make conversation like any other day; there were some people who talked about the storm and those who did not make it through the storm. Church members are helping each other by doing the necessary physical labor and providing a caring community for support.

The congregation is primarily functioning as a full Cathedral again because of the visit by Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew on 7 January 2006. His visit arose from the disaster. When asked if he would visit Holy Trinity after the disaster the Patriarch responded, “Now more than ever” (Stratis 2006). This promise of a visit gave everyone in the community the push they needed to get the Cathedral back into working order (Demarinis 2006). The following months were full of manual labor.

A mere four months after the storm, the Cathedral was in perfect condition. This pristine nature of the grounds gave people a place of stability, a place in which life could go on much as it always had, regardless of every day concerns about housing and employment. Arguably, this stability was never gone, because for the four months preceding the functionality of the Cathedral, the entire community was united in its rebuilding.

RESPONSES OF THE CONGREGATION TO THE DISASTER

The response of the community has centered on an attempt to return to their old lives again. Church members have made it clear that they are quickly trying to return their lives to normalcy. For some members of the congregation this will be harder than others as their homes were destroyed or their jobs were lost or both; however, with the Cathedral in good repair they have provided themselves a place which offers Greek Orthodox services, and which serves as a source of comfort and strength for the work ahead.

During one of my visits to the Cathedral there was talk during the sermon of the Greek Festival, which would be taking place this year. The festival may not be as large or as long as usual but the congregation is going to put it on and strive toward getting New Orleans, and specifically its corner of it, back to normal and perhaps stronger than before. It is clear that the people are steadfast in carrying on this tradition. There was also an ophthalmologist there that particular Sunday, a member of the congregation who wanted to help out those in the community by providing free glasses to replace those that had been lost in the storm (Hoffmann 2006).

Church members do not appear to be focused highly on helping people outside of the community to rebuild, but this is assuredly not from a lack of concern, but rather that their first priority is helping each other get back on their feet before they reach out (Stratis 2006). This goes along with their strong sense of community; they want to make sure that everyone inside of the local Greek population is stable first and foremost.

INTERVIEWS

Father Anthony Stratis, like many in Hurricane Katrina's wake, stayed with family during the time the city was flooded. He stayed with his wife Elaine's family in Atlanta. Their two sons attended school in Atlanta until the end of the semester, while he returned to New Orleans to help the rebuilding process (Stratis 2006).

Fr. Stratis explained that early on in the storm there was a church member who had a connection in the United States Navy. While first responders were still trying to get organized, sailors from the USS Iwo Jima went to the church and opened all the doors and windows to prevent mold from growing. They wiped down all the pews for the same reason and then removed all wooden chairs and stand podiums from the church in order for them to air out and to prevent them from rotting. While the Cathedral was blessed by the help it received from the Navy, there was still a significant amount of work to be done to repair the Cathedral before the Patriarch came in early January. Fr. Stratis explained how the walls of the Cathedral only appear to be made of marble; In reality, these walls are made of a wood frame with sheet rock and simply have a marble façade. This meant that the church members had to remove all the tiles and replace the dry wall behind them. In addition, a new base for the chanter chairs and stand was needed and the carpet was replaced (Stratis 2006).

One of the most remarkable stories related to the survival of the altar. In the Cathedral, the altar is in an elevated position. It lies up a stone staircase, behind a palisade in the front of the Cathedral. At the level of the altar, there is one final lip from the top step to the tile floor of that level. The water rose inside the cathedral all the way to that top step, but the water stopped right on the edge of the tile. None of the sacred objects were harmed. The altar remains intact and unchanged since the storm. The sacred objects were

all taken to a church in Baton Rouge where the community was holding service until the reconstruction was finished (Stratis 2006).

Fr. Stratis explained how the Patriarch had always planned to visit the Cathedral after its consecration in 2001. He stressed how important this Greek community is because it is the first Greek Orthodox Church in the Western Hemisphere. It was a great honor for Fr. Stratis to partake in a liturgy service with the Patriarch and it meant a great deal to the congregation. The Patriarch talked to the people of the community and took a tour of the Lower Ninth Ward with them. His visit to the Cathedral also put a deadline on the previously mentioned repairs; this deadline helped bring the community together (Stratis 2006).

The Cathedral is functioning now as it always has. The rebuilding aspect is getting the community as a whole back on its feet. There are fewer than half of the families back in the pews; that number, however, continues to grow steadily, as members of the congregation do the hard work of reconstructing their homes and finding employment.

Fr. Stratis expressed his hope for the politicians of New Orleans to act correctly by fixing the injustices that were already occurring, particularly in the education system, which “would have to work to achieve joke status” (Stratis 2006). He also expressed that there is not only a necessity to return the levees to pre-Katrina levels or better, but that there has to be a restoration of the wetlands that have been destroyed and which are continuing to be destroyed. There is hope for the city in Fr. Stratis’ eyes. He sees in the aftermath of the disaster an opportunity to clean the city of corrupt politics, which has clouded these issues in the past (Stratis 2006).

Petros Demarinis and Eleftherios Tzavellas are both chanters in the Cathedral. Mr. Demarinis stayed in Little Rock, Arkansas with his wife for two weeks before going to Mandeville, Louisiana to stay with one of his daughters for a week. Upon returning to New Orleans he found that his house had flooded and was in need of a total overhaul. His job, however, was still waiting for him at East Jefferson Hospital. For the next three months, he stayed with his other daughter while his house was gutted and rebuilt (Demarinis 2006).

When asked what has been the greatest aid to the community in this time of need, Mr. Demarinis asserted that the visit by Patriarch Bartholomew could not have helped more. He said, “It was a blessing. It reinforced the issue that we had to rebuild the inside of the Cathedral. We now had only four months to do it” (Demarinis 2006). The Patriarch being here was a blessing itself. He spoke to the congregation, which elevated their spirits, giving everyone a feeling that people around the world cared. Coming together to rebuild showed the members that their community was strong and that they could count on each other (Demarinis 2006).

Mr. Demarinis explained that while he felt that New Orleans would be rebuilt, it would take a significant amount of time. His main hopes were for a change in the leadership of the city and a placement of safeguards for the city. He said that there needs to be enough security for the city so that people can have piece of mind. Providing this security is the role of government and the only path to successfully re-inhabiting the city (Demarinis 2006).

Eleftherios or, as he is more commonly called, Teddy, is an older gentlemen. During the storm, he stayed with his daughter at Rice University in Houston for two weeks and

then later stayed with his son in Norfolk, Virginia for three weeks before returning to New Orleans, where he discovered that his home was virtually untouched.

He has been on the Board of Trustees of Holy Trinity for 45 years and was president of the board for four years. He has been with the community for the majority of his life and was not at all surprised when the community pulled together for the visit of the Patriarch and the rebuilding of the community as a whole (Tzavellas 2006).

He was optimistic about the future of the city insisting that New Orleans will be better than it was before. He expressed a sentiment that this disaster should be a wake up call for the Army Corps of Engineers that there must be some insurance room with the levees. The Corps cannot simply rebuild to pre-Katrina levels; it must build them higher and stronger (Tzavellas 2006). With proper leadership, he has high hopes for the future of the city.

It was clear throughout the visits and interviews that in this community there was no crisis of faith following the storm. Through the deep sense of community and the character of the people themselves, they held strong. When asked about this strength, Petros Demarinis stated the sentiment of the community by saying, “The only thing we have to balance us is religion. It’s what keeps you going. Mental stability is given by religion. Problems will exist and you don’t run away; you just dance to the music, and religion is what gives us the strength to carry on. God gives us hope; it’s what carries us” (Demarinis 2006).

CONCLUSION

The resolve of the Holy Trinity community is real and binding. The members have returned in smaller numbers than hoped, but they are here and they are slowly gaining back those numbers. Katrina has showed these parishioners what they always had: a community of faith. They have created a place where life can carry on like it always has. Because of the visit of Patriarch Bartholomew they completed the renovation process that the Cathedral and Hellenic center needed, amazingly, within four months. It was through the congregation’s deep sense of community and the visit by Patriarch Bartholomew that Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Cathedral has achieved the level of reconstruction it has and will make progress in the future.

Works Cited

Boojamra, John Lawrence. 2005 [1987]. “Schism: Christian Schism.” In *Encyclopedia of Religion*. Edited by Lindsay Jones. 2d ed. Detroit: Thomson Gale, 12: 8154-59.

Constantelos, Demeterios. 1982. *Understanding the Greek Orthodox Church*. New York: Seabury Press.

Demarinis, Petros. 2006. Interview on 5 March.

Harakas, Stanley Samuel. 2005 [1987]. "Greek Orthodox Church." In *Encyclopedia of Religion*. Edited by Lindsay Jones. 2d ed. Detroit: Thomson Gale, 6: 3656-59.

Hoffmann, Jonathan. 2006. Field notes of participant-observation at Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Cathedral 1200 Robert E. Lee Blvd. New Orleans, Louisiana on 29 January 29 2006.

Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Cathedral New Orleans, Louisiana. N.d. "A Consecration Celebration." Pamphlet.

Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Cathedral. [2006.] "Church History." <<http://www.holytrinitycathedral.org/history.html>> Accessed on 30 January 30 2006.

Stratis, Fr. Anthony. 2006. Interview on 25 February.

Tzavellas, Eleftherios ("Teddy"). 2006. Interview on 5 March.