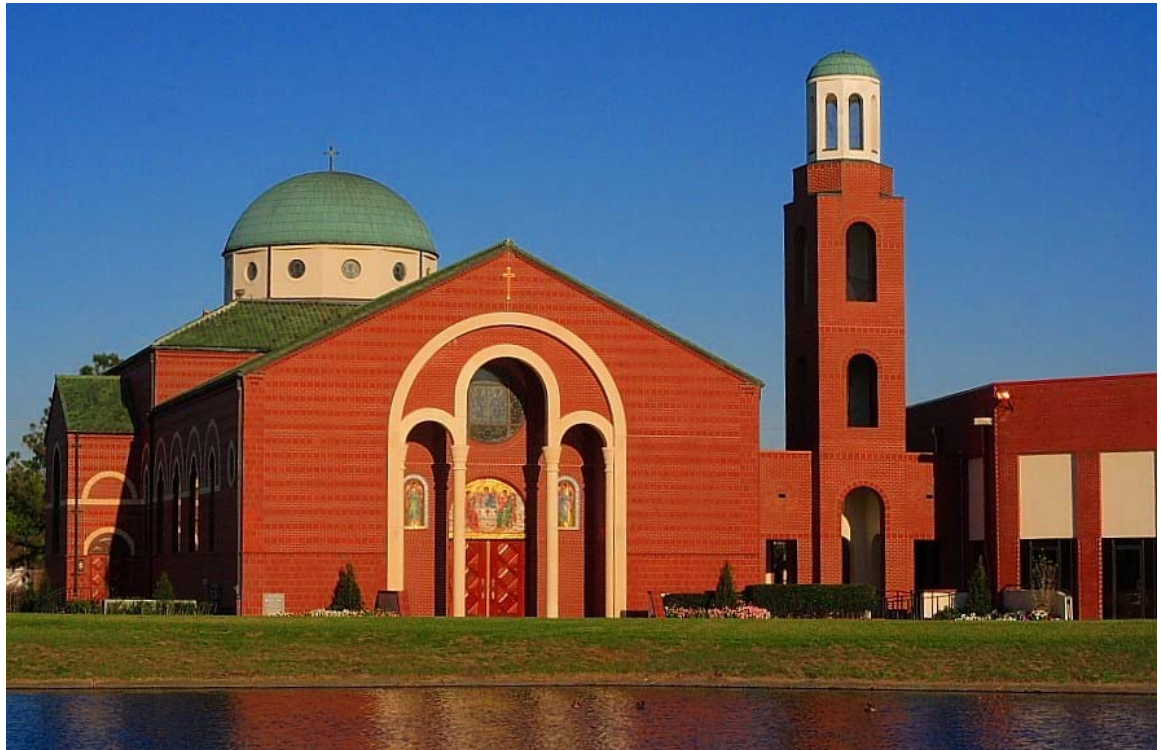


Honors World Religions  
April 25, 2006

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

## Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Cathedral

Tom Macom



On Bayou Saint John, at Robert E. Lee Boulevard and St. Bernard Avenue, only a half a mile from Lake Pontchartrain, stands a great and proud structure. With its majestic dome and towering belfry, Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Cathedral shines as a clear and beautiful beacon of hope and faith. In the afternoon sun, its red, ornamented façade reflects off of Bayou St. John, giving off an air of religious profundity. On Sundays and days with special services, a congregation ranging from elderly folks dressed in traditional fare to young professionals with a more modern definition of “formal” come to celebrate their faith. As sunlight pours in through the great stained-glass windows, the congregation’s members look on and cross themselves as beautiful and exacting services are performed. Only a few months earlier, the inside and the outside of the cathedral had a much more grim appearance. Dirty waterlines marked the exterior and interior walls of the cathedral. Moldy debris was strewn all about. Surfaces were caked with that curious powder that remains once floodwaters subside. All seemed in disarray. Hurricane Katrina had made its mark.

There was one thing, however, that did not change, one thing that has remained constant for nearly two thousand years. The faith of the Orthodox Church—the faith of Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Cathedral—remained. This component, of utmost importance, has been pulling the community of Holy Trinity through since Katrina. An immense spirit of belief and belonging marks the congregation of Holy Trinity. Orthodox Christianity is their faith, and Holy Trinity is their church. Disaster may present itself, but it cannot change what the congregation considers to be unchangeable.

### **AN UNCHANGING FAITH IN A CHANGING WORLD**

“The Orthodox church is the best kept secret,” says Holy Trinity parishioner and parish council member Victoria Catsulis. “Because we do not change, because it stays constant...that’s a wonderful asset for a religion” (Catsulis 2006). The Orthodox Church claims to have retained the teachings and traditions of the original Christian church. Its very name, “Orthodox,” comes from the Greek *orthodoxos*, “right belief” (Fortescue 2005).

The Orthodox Church of Constantinople is only a part of a larger body of Orthodoxy called the Eastern Orthodox Church. The Eastern Orthodox Church contains fifteen such “autocephalous” churches. Autocephaly, literally “self-headed,” denotes that each of these churches has a head bishop who does not report to any other higher-ranking bishop (Wikipedia contributors [2006a]). The Eastern Orthodox Church thus contains the Churches of Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, Jerusalem, Russia, Georgia, Serbia, Rumania, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Greece, Albania, Poland, the Czechlands and Slovakia, and the Orthodox Church in America (“World Orthodox Churches” [2006]). Each of these churches is in communion with the others. The Patriarch of Constantinople is considered the “first among equals” in this Eastern Orthodox Communion (Wikipedia contributors [2006c]).

The Eastern Orthodox Church claims its “right belief” by means of a direct apostolic succession. This belief is clearly promulgated in the Orthodox creed and statement of faith, the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed: “We believe in one holy, catholic, and apostolic church” (Wilhelm 2005). This signifies that the Orthodox Church of today is

directly linked with Jesus Christ and his apostles in an unbroken succession. The Roman Catholic Church claims much the same. Eleftherios Tzavellas, a member of the Holy Trinity community for sixty years, and self-professed historian, says that while visiting family in Mexico, he went to a Catholic church almost every Sunday, “because the Catholic and the Orthodox, they were [at] one time, one” (Tzavellas 2006). And indeed they were, until a defining point in history when the Church of the West became the Roman Catholic Church, and the Church of the East became the Eastern Orthodox Church, although each would claim to be the true, unchanged tradition founded by Christ.

The ultimate reasons for the split between the Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church were as much cultural as they were theological. Early on in Christianity, a structure of three major bishops—the patriarchs—was established. These were the bishops of Rome, Alexandria, and Antioch (later joined by the bishops of Constantinople and Jerusalem). Among these, the Bishop of Rome had the type of “first among equals” status that the Bishop of Constantinople possesses in the Eastern Orthodox Church today, as he was considered especially important as the direct successor of the apostle Saint Peter. Toward the end of the fourth century, the territory of the Roman Empire was divided in half, exacerbating problems that were already being seen between the “first among equals” in Rome and the rest of the patriarchs. The pope claimed authority over the other patriarchs, while the others dissented, saying that the pope only had authority over the Western Christians. The Eastern Church also rejected an addition to the Nicene Creed by the Western Church. These great conflicts, as well as the fundamental differences between the language and culture of the empires of the East and West, finally led to the East-West Schism of 1054 (Wikipedia contributors [2006b]). From this time on, the Roman Catholic Church dominated the West, and the Eastern Orthodox Church dominated the East.

The Eastern Orthodox faith continued to spread and flourish. It gained great influence and power throughout Eastern Europe, Russia, and beyond, all the while doing its best to maintain the original message of Christ. When the Greek Orthodox faith finally arrived in the New World, the Holy Trinity community of New Orleans was the first to emerge.

### **A LITTLE COMMUNITY GOES A LONG WAY**

During the early 1800s, the first Greek Orthodox settlers arrived in the New World. Many of these settlers arrived due to their trades as sailors, merchants, and other traveling professions (Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Cathedral [2006]). New Orleans, being one of the most important—if not the single most important—port city of the western hemisphere at the time, was a natural destination for these Greek settlers. The community of Greek Orthodox believers grew steadily throughout the nineteenth century, and the need for an Orthodox church soon became apparent. Father Anthony Stratis, the current Dean of Holy Trinity Cathedral, explained that “when there was a need for spiritual guidance, rather than the Greek Orthodox in any area going to other Christian churches, they felt the need of maintaining their Greek Orthodox faith” (Stratis 2006). Thus, several attempts were made to found a Greek Orthodox church, but all failed due to lack of financial backing. This changed once Nicholas Marino Benachi, Greek businessman, cotton broker, Consul of the Royal Government of Greece, and the greatest benefactor to the early Holy Trinity community, arrived on the scene.

Benachi had tried earlier to obtain property for Holy Trinity in 1860, but these efforts also fell short. Benachi stayed faithful to the community, however, and offered his own property as a temporary place of worship. Thus the small mission church of Holy Trinity was officially founded in 1864. Holy Trinity celebrated the liturgy on the property of Benachi and at several other locations until 1866, when the community finally obtained land of its own. Benachi agreed to sell the congregation a piece of land on North Dorgenois Street for \$1,200, upon which a church had already been constructed (Catsulis 2003, 20). Benachi, who “lived a block and a half from the old church,” remained an important benefactor of the community (Tzavellas 2006).

The original Holy Trinity Church on North Dorgenois Street fit right into the environs of New Orleans. It was constructed in the traditional New Orleans “shotgun house” style. Although there were few characteristics of this structure that hinted at its importance and uniqueness, the Holy Trinity Church began to prosper as time passed (Catsulis, 2003, 20).

Holy Trinity was primarily a church of immigrants. At its inception, it was made of Greeks, Serbs, and Russians, with Syrians arriving soon thereafter. New Orleans retained its role as an especially important port city, and immigration of the Orthodox only increased. The new and old immigrants saw Holy Trinity, a holder of their unchanging Orthodox faith, as a constant in their now drastically different lives in the New World. A strong bond grew between Holy Trinity and its congregation. The church was something upon which they could always depend. In addition to being the spiritual center of the community, it soon became the cultural and social center as well. A Greek language and culture school, a library, a parish house, and other such additions were founded for the benefit of the Holy Trinity community (Catsulis 2003, 22). As the congregation grew more and more prosperous in New Orleans, it still remained dedicated to “the little wooden church on Dorgenois Street” (Catsulis 2003, dedication).

Three-quarters of a century after its founding, however, it seemed that the Holy Trinity community was outgrowing this little wooden church. Holy Trinity historian Eleftherios Tzavellas said that the building of the second Holy Trinity Church was one of his most vivid memories. In the early twentieth century, the church was damaged by fire and rebuilt on a wooden frame. “In 1948...it was condemned by the city, and had to be torn down,” Tzavellas explained. “And then we built a new one 1949 to 1951. It was not as big as this one here, but it was a nice church” (Tzavellas 2006). After the Cornerstone Services of 1949, a new Holy Trinity Church soon rose from the very ground upon which the original Holy Trinity once stood. A community center was constructed soon thereafter in 1959 (Catsulis 2003, 27). With new facilities and a larger congregation than ever, Holy Trinity entered into a new era of prosperity. In 1960 the 15th Biennial Clergy-Laity Congress, the supreme legislative body of the entire Greek Orthodox Archdiocese, made a decision that would profoundly honor Holy Trinity. The once small mission church was now authorized for consecration as a cathedral. On October 9, 1960, Holy Trinity was consecrated as a cathedral, and began its five-year tenure as See of the Diocese for the Eighth Archdiocesan District of the Greek Orthodox Church in the United States (Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Cathedral [2006]).

In 1974 another momentous event for Holy Trinity occurred. The first Greek Festival of New Orleans was organized and celebrated by the congregants. The Greek Festival is “a fundraiser,” Victoria Catsulis explained. “It’s a survival tactic that was initiated in the seventies. The president of the community at the time, named Dennis Georges...traveled

greatly, saw other Greek communities, saw that it was successful in other areas, and encouraged them here to incorporate that same idea.” Incorporate it they did, and the Greek Festival took off in New Orleans. “It was pretty successful from the very beginning, but it grew,” said Catsulis (2006). The Holy Trinity congregation puts much energy into the preparation for the festivals.

During the formative years of the festival, Holy Trinity decided to undergo yet another transformation. The original church property on North Dorgenois Street was sold in 1976 and new property by Bayou St. John on Robert E. Lee Boulevard was purchased (Catsulis 2003, 28). Even while temporarily nomads without a church to call their own, the congregation of Holy Trinity continued to nurture their Greek Festival as a means of celebration, and—perhaps more realistically and importantly—as a means of raising funds for their new cathedral.

The Hellenic Cultural Center, which adjoins the present Cathedral, was completed in 1980. The congregation once again had a home. Five years later, Holy Trinity’s beautiful traditional Byzantine cathedral was completed. The Thyranixia Service (“door-opening ceremony”) was held on December 8, 1985 (Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Church [2006]). The community eagerly embraced their new home, and throughout the late 1980s and 1990s, the community continued to prosper. Similarly, the Greek Festival flourished, reaching peak attendances of between 24,000 and 25,000 people during a two-and-a-half-day period (Catsulis 2006).

A historic event for Holy Trinity occurred on February 4, 2001. On this date, the present Holy Trinity Cathedral was consecrated by hierarchs. Father Anthony Stratis described this event as one of his most vivid memories of Holy Trinity, “when relics of martyrs were placed in the altar, and sealed in the altar. And the archbishop and our metropolitan came for that, as well as another bishop” (Stratis 2006). Victoria Catsulis described the consecration ceremonies as “very awe inspiring, very moving” (Catsulis 2006). The Holy Trinity congregation received congratulations from all sources. The celebration was lauded by Orthodox hierarchs—including the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople—religious leaders of all denominations, and political leaders, including local politicians and President George W. Bush. A great series of services and rituals marked this profound moment in the Cathedral’s history.

## **DISASTER AND THE JOURNEY TO RECOVERY**

Four and a half years after the glorious celebration of the consecration, Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Cathedral stood amidst miles and miles of destruction. Stagnant floodwater saturated the structure, staining the walls with the discouraging water lines, which New Orleanians now know all too well. The cathedral was in disrepair, and more importantly, the congregation was in disapora. At the approach of Katrina, the Holy Trinity community fled in all directions, some moving just out of the path of the hurricane and returning as promptly as possible, and others moving thousands of miles away—never to return. This uncertain and broken condition of the congregation was to pose the greatest problem for the revival of Holy Trinity.

The Dean of the Cathedral, Father Anthony Stratis, left New Orleans the evening of Saturday, August 27, 2005. He would have departed sooner if not for his position as Dean. He notified the congregation that the cathedral would be closed during the duration

of the hurricane emergency, and encouraged his people to move out of the area and find safe shelter out of the path of the hurricane (Stratis 2006). Some of the congregants had left even before Father Stratis' announcement. Others were not as decisive. Eleftherios Tzavellas was hesitant at first: "Because all the years I was here, I see many hurricanes. The first one was in 1947. And many others. But I didn't leave New Orleans...I never left the city [before]" (Tzavellas 2006). This time Mr. Tzavellas left the city. Coaxed by his grandson, Tzavellas traveled to Houston to stay with his daughter.

Shortly after Hurricane Katrina passed over the New Orleans area, it became clear that there would be no immediate return to New Orleans. Most of the city, including Holy Trinity Cathedral only a half a mile from Lake Pontchartrain, was under water. The congregation found itself spread all over the nation. The unity once found at Holy Trinity was now broken. In this time of uncertainty, nothing was static. Victoria Catsulis and her husband originally evacuated to Houston, and then traveled to Colorado to visit their son at the Air Force Academy, and then traveled back to Houston, and then traveled to stay with friends in Baton Rouge (Catsulis 2006). Father Stratis initially evacuated east to Tallahassee to stay with his brother, and then traveled with his family to Atlanta where there would be more appropriate conditions for his wife and children, and finally ended up in Baton Rouge where there is a Greek Orthodox chapel (Stratis 2006). Eleftherios Tzavellas stayed with his daughter in Houston for two weeks, and then with his son in Norfolk, Virginia for a month (Tzavellas 2006). With all of this moving around, keeping track of the congregation's members seemed like a logistical nightmare, if not an impossibility.

In the wake of the hurricane, Father Stratis spent almost all of his time "trying to make phone calls, and contacting parishioners through email, trying to put together a list of who was where" (Stratis 2006). This list soon became a major undertaking. Not only was Father Stratis worried for the well being of his congregants, but the archdiocese and metropolis were also gravely concerned. Father Stratis did his best to record all of the information that he could gather, but the task was immense.

Victoria Catsulis had heard about Father Stratis' project, and she was more than eager to assist. Father Stratis sent her the information that he had, and she began to work (Catsulis 2006). Catsulis made phone calls, sent out emails, and created a spreadsheet for all of the data. Soon she began to see a great network emerge out of her congregation. "And then it was amazing," she said. "You'd get one email, and you'd send it out. And they'd tell you about three, four more people, and you'd get that information, and it just grew...." (Catsulis 2006). The congregation's members were getting back in touch. In October, when Catsulis turned over her results to the church, she had amassed data on over 256 families. This was encouraging, but the dark side of the situation also was becoming apparent. About "121 families were out of their homes, either temporarily, or they were displaced, either because they left and couldn't get back, had some damage, or a lot of damage. Of those, 56 had severe damage, and of those 56, sixteen had total devastation" (Catsulis 2006).

The blow that Hurricane Katrina dealt to the congregation was severe. Both Father Stratis and Mr. Tzavellas saw the diminished congregation as a large and worrisome problem. "The biggest change," said Father Stratis, "is coming to terms with the fact that it's a smaller parish right now. I think that's the biggest change. And the challenges of doing what we can as a smaller parish, and not having what we had before" (Stratis

2006). While Father Stratis believed that what the church was missing would come back if given time, Mr. Tzavellas had a more uncertain outlook: "Some people closed their houses altogether. And some, they were up in age, they moved, and they have relatives in other states.... And they're still up there.... When are they coming down here? Who knows? They have families" (Tzavellas 2006). When asked if many people will return, Mr. Tzavellas shook his head and said, "I don't know. I really don't know...." Victoria Catsulis affirmed the plight of many parishioners. Out of the data that she gathered, she remarked that most of the congregants whose homes had received severe damage were older. Some of these members of the community had to relocate to assisted living facilities out of town, and others were still struggling with rebuilding inside and outside of the city (Catsulis 2006). Often it was simply impossible for them to stay in New Orleans.

While Catsulis' spreadsheet was painting a sad picture of the congregation, Father Stratis was trying to piece the rest of the picture back together. With the help of Parish Council President John Georges, Holy Trinity was able to establish a temporary location in Jefferson Parish (Stratis 2006). Services were celebrated there for three months, from the end of September until the end of December.

Meanwhile, the cathedral itself was being examined. In November, Victoria Catsulis once again played a role in resurrecting Holy Trinity when she was put in charge of cleaning up the cultural center that adjoins the cathedral. Even at that point, she recounted, there was no electricity, and water was still sitting in the building. Two weekends were organized in November when parishioners came and helped clean up. There was much to be done. Catsulis said that she was so overcome by the sheer amount of items that had to be discarded that she once even suggested to Father Stratis that he throw away the water-damaged Sacrats. The Sacrats record all of the marriages, christenings and other such events that have taken place in the cathedral. "And I wasn't even registering. It didn't hit. I was just [seeing] that it was wet, and it was moldy, and it was nasty" (Catsulis 2006). Father Stratis ultimately placed the Sacrats to the side instead of throwing them away. Most of the other items in the flooded cultural center and cathedral did not receive the same luxury.

Holy Trinity was cleaning up and it was getting prepared for something big. The congregation was able to celebrate Christmas in its own beautiful cathedral (Stratis 2006). From there on, the cathedral functioned in a limited capacity. It was locked up during the day and most of the week, and a trailer with a security guard was placed in the parking lot.

Yet another historical event occurred at Holy Trinity only a few weeks later when the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople visited Holy Trinity on January 8, 2006. More than one thousand people showed up to see Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I at the cathedral. "Your pain was and is our pain. It was felt by all humanity," said the Patriarch about the suffering brought about by Hurricane Katrina (Nolan 2006). There was even more preparation at Holy Trinity in anticipation of the Patriarch's visit. "They made such a tremendous effort in restoring the building so that they could have the Patriarch visit," remembered Victoria Catsulis. "It ended up that this church and this community center are like an oasis in that desert over there. They were landscaped, they were cleaned, they were renovated" (Catsulis 2006).

And so it seems that Holy Trinity is well on its way to recovery. On Friday, March 24, 2006, Father Stratis estimated that a typical turn out at services at the cathedral was about 60 percent of what it was before the hurricane (Stratis 2006). Victoria Catsulis was optimistic about the upcoming Greek Festival in May, at which she would have a booth. She believed that between twelve and fifteen thousand people might show up to the festival (Catsulis 2006). Father Stratis also said that Holy Trinity “should be pretty much back into shape again” by the time of the festival (Stratis 2006). But what is the source of this steady recovery? What calls the congregation back to Holy Trinity?

“We believe on faith. We believe on faith. And as much as people have the faith, they come to the church,” says Eleftherios Tzavellas (Tzavellas 2006). Hurricane Katrina may have destroyed houses and damaged familiar structures, but the faith of the congregation—the unchanging faith of the Orthodox Church—has not even been touched. “Always have faith,” says Tzavellas. Farther Stratis agrees: “My faith pulled me through, it pulled my family through, and it pulled our parishioners through. During the course of that time of uncertainty, during the course of the storm and shortly thereafter, my faith was definitely what kept me going” (Stratis 2006). The Orthodox faith of Holy Trinity continues to unite and empower the congregation. Father Stratis, Mr. Tzavellas, and Mrs. Catsulis are exemplary, active members of the Orthodox faith, using their steadfast belief to make a difference in their community.

## CONCLUSION

It has been nearly two thousand years since the foundations of the Orthodox Christian faith were put in place. They have not changed. It has been nearly 150 years since a community that could barely support itself financially began a small mission church in New Orleans. Today that small church is a great cathedral, but its faith is just the same, and just as strong. “Orthodox never change. And our community probably epitomizes that statement,” claimed Victoria Catsulis (2006). In the face of terrible disaster, anything familiar or constant can be a great relief. For the community of Holy Trinity, the constant in their lives was that which they already held so dear: their faith. Orthodox never change.

And so Holy Trinity rebuilds. Just as Greek Orthodox faith will remain constant, so will the community of Holy Trinity.

Whenever something needs to be done as a community, this community here really pulls together and works together and gets the job not just done, but done in a notable way, in a beautiful way that demonstrates our faith. The folks are very much examples of faith when it comes to serving the church, because everyone has a kind of different gifts that they can offer, and different aspects of what they offer and what they do. But they all pretty much do it for the same reason: that’s because it’s their church. They have a sense of feeling that it’s their church—which it is. So if we all work together because it’s our church, a lot gets done (Stratis 2006).

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