

An Old World Response to a New World Situation: Greek Clergy in the Service of the Russian Mission to America

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Abstract

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The author reviews the history of early Orthodox missions in North America, concentrating on the relationship between Greek priests and Russian parishes in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This research reveals that the customary history and sociological analysis of these parishes, which has often treated them as places of refuge for Orthodox Christians of the same ethnic background, must give way to a new understanding that takes account of cross-cultural relationships that were sometimes amicable and sometimes not. These Greek Orthodox priests – four of whom are focused on here: Kallinikos Kanellas, Theoklitos Triantafilides, Ambrose Vretta, and Michael Andreades – were not simply recreating patterns used in the “old countries” but in fact transplanted traditional missionary concerns onto American soil and thus directly engaged their immediate American context. These priests responded to a new context principally in two ways: the development of multiethnic parishes and ministries, and the conversion of Carpatho-Rusyn Eastern Catholics from the Austro-Hungarian Empire following the example of Alexis Toth.



Introduction

One of the central ways that American Orthodoxy has been characterized has been by an appeal to “refuge-seeking.” That is, the Orthodox immigrants came to America, encountered an unwelcoming land (whether due to labor disputes or because Orthodoxy was unrecognized and unknown – or other factors), and so turned inward, setting up brotherhoods and parishes as ways to preserve themselves within their American surroundings. This is the standard sociological narrative and, indeed, a narrative given by many Orthodox themselves.¹ There is an important element of truth to this. It was difficult for the immigrants. They did often find themselves on the losing end of labor disputes. They were sometimes mistreated. Slavic immigrants often worked difficult, low-paying jobs. Orthodox immigrants did form brotherhoods, to help alleviate strains and stresses, and the local parish did take on a cultural atmosphere that has endured in some places even to this very day.

True as all this is, reality is not so simple. If we continue to characterize the story of American Orthodox history in this manner, we will continue to dismiss other important elements of this history. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Greek Orthodox clergy served the Russian Orthodox Mission to North America. Although such clergy served to sustain immigrants’ connections to their traditional religion, and did recognize the “refuge-seeking” aspect of Orthodox parishes, these clergymen also demonstrated a transplanting of traditional missionary concerns onto American soil, and in so doing, directly engaged their immediate American context. As will be seen below, this engagement consisted of two central activities – the development of multiethnic parishes and ministries, and the conversion of Eastern Catholics in a manner unique to the American context. Both of these elements were

¹ See, for example, Peter Berger, who claimed Orthodoxy has responded “defensively”: Idem, “Orthodoxy and the Pluralistic Challenge,” in *The Orthodox Parish in America: Faithfulness to the Past and Responsibility for the Future*, ed. Anton C. Vrame (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2003), 39.

continuations of Old World constructs. At the same time, both were changed in important ways due to the American context.

The service of several Greek Orthodox clergyman was important to both the development of multiethnic parishes and evangelization. The work of four priests, in particular, stands out: Frs. Kallinikos Kanellas (who served from 1889 until 1892), Theoklitos Triantafilides (who served from 1896 until his death in 1916), Ambrose Vretta (who served from 1892 through 1896), and Michael Andreades (who served from 1905 until 1918). These men were not the only Greeks serving parishes of the Russian mission, but they were the only Greeks who served as priests for the Russian Mission. For example, the Russian Orthodox cathedral in San Francisco had had Greek men who were theologically educated but not ordained serve as the head of its parish school.² These four missionary priests are also to be distinguished from a small group of several other priests who had requested antimensia from the Russian Mission but were not further integrated into the Russian Mission.³ Admittedly, Frs. Ambrose Vretta and Kallinikos Kanellas both served short tenures in the Russian Mission and both left under difficult circumstances, yet their missionary work proves consistent with that of Frs. Michael Andreades and Theoklitos Triantafilides.

The Historical Background to Their Ministries

The presence of Greeks in Russian theological schools was commonplace in the nineteenth century. This was to be the background of three of the four priests discussed here, and certainly created a context for all four. The root of this connection between Greece and Russia originated in the concept of the Byzantine Commonwealth, a concept that continued as an Orthodox Commonwealth after the fall of Constantinople in

² See Alexander Doumouras, "Greek Orthodox Communities in America Before World War I," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 11 (1967): 175, 180.

³ *Ibid.*, 188. Referring to a file in the archives of the OCA in Syosset, New York, Doumouras lists five priests and one parish secretary who made such requests.