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The Lonely Path of Integrity
Spyridon, Archbishop of America (1996-1999)

by Justine Frangouli-Argyris

On The Book's Trail

by Justine Frangouli

The Lonely Path of Integrity is not merely an authorized biography of Archbishop Spyridon, an overview of his "works and days," as they unfolded during his tumultuous three-year ministry (1996-1999) at the helm of the Church of America.

More than a simple portrayal of a religious leader, who from an early age was destined for the cloth, the book endeavors to shed light on the journey of a child who was born in America, grew up in Greece, was educated in Europe, and served the Church for 25 years in Switzerland and Italy as a cleric of the Ecumenical Patriarchate before coming full circle and ending up in his native America as Archbishop.

A careful reading of his multifaceted life and ecclesiastical career reveals a man who brought luster to the Orthodox Church in Italy and America as he strove to preserve Byzantine Orthodox tradition and to ensure the survival of Hellenism in the Diaspora. He lived by and ultimately fell defending the banner of "Orthodoxy-Hellenism," intertwined notions on whose axis his turbulent career was doomed to turn.

The book attempts to take a judicious, well-documented look at the personality of a church leader assailed by exponents of an arrogant conception of church governance. It dispels the illusion that the Greek American community could emerge unscathed from the incessant manipulation by the back rooms of power.

This biography focuses mostly on Spyridon's three-year ministry, from the rise to the fall of the fifth Archbishop of America. From his very enthronement, it became evident that his tenure bore an "expiry date." The heightened interest in this Archbishop arises from the role he was destined to play in events unique in the Orthodox Church's centuries-old history, events that presaged the future of the Greek American community.

The frenetic schemes originating from Orthodoxy's center in Constantinople wounded not only the Church of America but also the whole Greek American community.

The ousting of two Archbishops, Iakovos and Spyridon, from the Archdiocese of America within a span of three years is unprecedented in the annals of the Greek Orthodox Church. These developments ultimately throw into question the very foundations of her polity, structure, and canon practice.

The strategy used for the removal of both church leaders was also unparalleled. Far from yielding to pressure, the Phanar instigated the events.

The tactics that divided the Greeks of America into factions lay the Ecumenical Patriarchate open to charges of neopapism. This has caused nearly irreparable harm to relations between Greek Orthodox and other Orthodox communities.

All during Archbishop Spyridon's tempestuous three years in office, power brokers spun a web of Byzantine intrigue. Their machinations spread through the Phanar involving Metropolitans, priests, laypersons, Greek American media, and major Greek and American newspapers.

Patriarchate cohorts in America played a decisive role in concocting and disseminating a crisis throughout the Church of America and indeed throughout the entire Greek American community. Later, the Greek Government, aces up its sleeve, entered the scene.

Thus, the game quickly took on the color of money and power. It permeated the Church's relations with the Patriarchate, the Greek State, the clergy in America, and prominent Greek Americans, threatening the unity of Orthodoxy and Hellenism in America.

The clergy regarded the restoration of the Orthodox Byzantine tradition in the Archdiocese of America as the thin end of the wedge. Equally, the Archbishop's intent to redefine Greek American identity in order to safeguard Hellenism in the American melting pot alarmed the champions of the Americanization of Orthodoxy - a movement that peaked in the 1970s with the introduction of English into the Divine Liturgy.

The upshot of the three-year struggle was the consolidation of the autocephalous movement in the Church of America,

the revival of partisanship among Greek Americans, the marginalization of the vital issues facing this community and the now firmly entrenched belief that the Patriarchate aims at all costs to diminish the role of the Archbishop of America.

Archbishop Spyridon, now withdrawn from active ministry, has consented to put on record -through his notes, diary, and archives- the dramatic triennium, which has left an indelible mark on Hellenism in America.

Sources for the recording and assessment of the events include the Archbishop himself, people closely associated with him on a personal or professional level, the Greek American and Greek media, as well as the American press, and finally the author's personal experience from witnessing the events as a journalist.

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