

History

More Than A Century of Christian Philanthropy: The History of Philoptochos?

The following are sections from The History of Philoptochos – [**Found on the National Philoptochos Society Web Site**](#)

The philanthropic endeavors of the Greek Orthodox Ladies Philoptochos Society during the past century is a genuine expression of Christian charity, which has embraced an enormous manifestation of love. This manifestation of love has been evident in the multitude of meaningful programs and activities undertaken during its years of its existence.

"Philanthropia" is a tradition of the Greek Orthodox Church, dating from the Byzantine Empire, which was the first State to offer philanthropic and charitable assistance to its citizens. Saint James, in his Epistle, Chapter 1, Verse 22, exhorts all Christians to be "Doers of the Word, and not hearers only." The members of the Philoptochos are "doers." Their accomplishments are monumental and are recorded in the annals of every Chapter of the organization.

The beginning of the Philoptochos Society can be traced to the late nineteenth century when hundreds of immigrants were arriving daily in the United States from Greece, Asia Minor and Constantinople. In 1894, Father Paisios Ferentinos, who was serving the Holy Trinity Church in New York City, undertook, with the assistance of some of the ladies of his community, the formidable task of welcoming the new émigrés and assist them to acclimate themselves to their new environment. Throughout the nation, women's clubs were being formed: in New York City, Chicago, Lowell, Philadelphia, Birmingham, Boston, San Francisco, Washington, D.C., St. Louis, Milwaukee, Newark, New Haven, and wherever there were Greek Orthodox Churches.

In 1902, the first Ladies Philoptochos was officially established at the Holy Trinity Church in New York City, under the spiritual guidance of Father Methodios Kourkoulis, and the leadership of three prominent ladies in the Greek community: Mrs. Anthony Rallis, Mrs. Nicholas Calvocoreshis and Mrs. George Galatis. The Society applied for a charter to the State of New York as a philanthropic agency engaged in charitable activities rendering services to the poor.

In 1909, a Philoptochos Society was formed in Chicago, utilizing the facilities of the Hull House, a social center, as its headquarters. Miss Jane Addams, a fervent phil-Hellene, was the director and founder of Hull House, and rendered immeasurable services to the Greek community.

In 1922, The Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of North and South America was founded and received its incorporation from the State of New York. The Archdiocese was organized and functioned under the ecclesiastical and spiritual jurisdiction of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople. After several years the State of New York granted a Charter to the Holy Trinity Philoptochos Society in New York City which was received on July 23, 1928. This Charter or Incorporation was issued under the Membership Corporation Law, in the name of the "Greek Ladies Philoptochos Adelphotis of New York, Inc.."

On February 28, 1931, Archbishop Athenagoras was enthroned as Primate of the Greek Orthodox Church in North and South America. He was highly regarded as a man of vision with extraordinary administrative ability. A new era in the life and mission of the Greek community commenced under his leadership. These were turbulent times for the Greeks in America. Archbishop Athenagoras soon realized the urgency of providing adequate philanthropic and relief services to the poor and suffering omogenia.

With the convening of the Archdiocese Fourth General Assembly in New York City in November 1931, the Philoptochos Society was an important item on the agenda. A decision was taken to establish a national women's organization as the official philanthropic auxiliary of the Church, merging all of the existing chapters, which numbered more than 300, to function under the Archdiocese constitution with specific By-laws issued for the Philoptochos.

Archbishop Athenagoras, immediately set about developing the proper legal structure for the new organization. Cognizant of the fact that the Holy Trinity Philoptochos had received its incorporation or charter from the State of New York, the Archbishop and executive committee of the Society deemed it prudent to utilize this Incorporation. Mrs. Eriphili Vrachnos, President of the Philoptochos, presented the Charter to Archbishop Athenagoras, and Central Council was appointed which included the executive committee of the Holy Trinity Philoptochos Society, and the presidents of all Philoptochos Chapters in the greater New York Area, with the Archbishop serving as

President. This became the nucleus of the national Federation of Greek Ladies Philoptochos Societies of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of North and South America.

For the next several months, the Philoptochos Societies continued their work, aiding the sick, the needy, the poor, the imprisoned, and the impoverished. They served on educational committees, organized choirs, baked the "prosforo," sewed items for the Altar, offered friendship and fellowship to newcomers, and supported a variety of civic and community programs to raise funds for their respective parishes.

On October 20, 1932, Archbishop Athenagoras issued his first encyclical to the Philoptochos Chapters, listing a series of By-Laws and Guidelines under which the organization would function under the Constitution of the Archdiocese. The Archbishop expressed his "joy" for the opportunity to "send this important communication to the Greek women of America." He acknowledged receipt of the documents on the organization of the "Adelphotis - Sisterhood, in accordance with the Constitution of the Archdiocese" and the ratification of the Society's elections.

The Central Committee of the Adelphotis was established in order to strengthen the organization, to serve the local chapter and to present an organized program to the Greek community.

In an encyclical issued at the Fourth General Assembly of the Archdiocese (New York City, November 14 - 20, 1931), the Archbishop requested that the "Philoptochos plan many events for the entire family, featuring music, lectures, performances, sponsoring bazaars and the Saint Basil's pita, requesting a small admission fee and including a raffle. For the children, develop a separate club under your Chapter, which should have its own President, present children's observances and meetings, so that the youth will become accustomed to your good example and will be of greater interest to them." His Eminence also instructed the Ladies to contact City Hall, the Welfare Department and the American philanthropic offices in their city to make their work more fruitful... The Archdiocese has acquired two homes and orphanages at Pomfret, Connecticut, and the Saint Stefanos Monastery at Gastonia, North Carolina. It is urgent that we establish a children's home and orphanage and I would be happy if you would undertake the sustenance of the orphans of the community."

The historic encyclical inaugurated the National Philoptochos Society, encompassing

every aspect of service Archbishop Athenagoras envisioned for the organization to assist the Greek Orthodox community. Following this initial encyclical from Archbishop Athenagoras granting official status to the Ladies Philoptochos as a Archdiocesan philanthropic organization, the mission of the Adelphotis began in earnest to comply with the By-laws and to serve effectively the Greek community.

Throughout his tenure, Archbishop Athenagoras addressed many communications to the women, over the years, offering suggestions, counseling their efforts, praising their accomplishments. On June 17, 1936, stating in an encyclical to the Priests, Board of Trustees and all Greek Orthodox Christians in the Archdiocese: "the mission promoted by the Philoptochos in many parishes has accomplished miracles." On another occasion the Archbishop offered many suggestions to increase the membership of the Philoptochos in order to aid the poor. He asked that the ladies be concerned for the school and the students who are poor; he asked that the Feast day of Saints Cosmas and Damianos, which is observed on November 1st, be designated as the Patron Saint of the Philoptochos (unless the local chapter has another patron Saint already designated).

On July 17, 1936, Archbishop Athenagoras, in an encyclical to the Greek Orthodox community, expressed concern for the education of the youth. He urged the establishment of Afternoon Schools and Sunday Schools where they did not exist and organize Philoptochos Societies in their respective communities. He further asked the Philoptochos, if at all possible, to take responsibility for both of these schools.

The Holy Cross Theological School was founded in June, 1937, in Pomfret, Connecticut, by Archbishop Athenagoras who announced to the Philoptochos Society that it would begin functioning the following September. The Archbishop directed a special appeal to the Philoptochos to "devote" themselves to the Theological School, "where your children will be educated as teachers and priests." The Ladies Philoptochos Societies accepted the challenge. Throughout the Theological School's history, the Philoptochos has contributed generously in numerous ways. One famous event was the "fasoulatha" dinners held in the Church halls with proceeds sent to the School. In his encyclical, Archbishop Athenagoras stated, "with the establishment of the Holy Cross Theological School, a new page has been turned in the history of the Greeks in America and the great role of the women will be recorded." In the ensuing years the Philoptochos was (and still is) in the forefront of activity to aid the School and its vitally important programs.

In a relatively short period following its establishment, the Philoptochos was engaged in a broad program of philanthropy, educational projects, emergency relief in the United States and Greece on a local and national level.

Another glorious chapter in the history of the Philoptochos Society was the mobilization of its members to lend assistance to Greece following the invasion of Mussolini's armies in October, 1940. Prime Minister John Metaxas' dramatic "OXI" to Italy's request to surrender, resounded around the world. The Greeks in America felt great pride and love for their Motherland and rushed to help. The Greek War Relief Association, Inc., was launched by Harold Vanderbilt and Spyros Skouras with the blessings and cooperation of Archbishop Ahtenagoras. The Philoptochos undertook the enormous task to aid the courageous Greek people who were starving and suffering untold hardships. Hundreds of thousands of packages were shipped to the people of Greece, including food, clothing, medicine, blankets, hospital equipment and an ambulance bearing the name of the Philoptochos.

Spyros Skouras of Twentieth Century Fox spearheaded the activity of the Greek War Relief. He arranged for a premiere benefit of the famous film, "Gone With the Wind" with the ladies engaged in the myriad of details for this event; a special "Tag Day" was initiated by the Philoptochos throughout the U.S. with the ladies soliciting contributions on street corners, restaurants, super markets and other business establishments, including the neighborhood theatres; many events and programs were organized with proceeds sent to the Greek War Relief; and "knit a sweater for a soldier" was a popular project. Sewing Centers were set up with the valuable assistance of the Council of Hellenic-Jewish Clothing Manufacturers which was headed by Joseph Josephs, providing hundreds of articles of clothing for children and adults in Greece.

The activity of the Greek War Relief continued for several years. With the entry of the U.S. in the war following Pearl Harbor, the Ladies Philoptochos devoted long hours to selling War Bonds, to the American Red Cross under the leadership of Dr. George Papanickolaou (who later developed the famous "Pap" test to detect Cancer of the uterus in women). The Philoptochos offered hospitality to soldiers on leave, prompting the American Government to praise the efforts of the Philoptochos.

On March 3, 1944, Archbishop Athenagoras announced that the Philoptochos Society had purchased the magnificent 250-acre Jacob Ruppert estate in Garrison, New York, at

a cost of \$55,000. It was choice property beautifully landscaped and situated on the shores of the Hudson River, opposite the West Point Military Academy. The Archbishop's dream had become a reality! He had attempted since 1932 to establish a Children's 'Home and Orphanage. Now, with the valuable assistance from the Philoptochos and the proceeds of the Vasilopita from the two previous years, the Ruppert Estate would become a haven for Greek Orthodox children.

On March 15, 1944, the legal papers were signed and the Philoptochos took possession of the estate, which included several buildings. The Children's Home and School was placed under the direct supervision of the central Council of the Philoptochos. Still ahead to be accomplished were two huge tasks: the complete renovation of the buildings; and the legal status of the organization. The Philoptochos applied for and received a Certificate of Incorporation from the State of New York dated July 12th, 1944.

With the approval of the Certificate of Incorporation by the State of New York, the Philoptochos Greek Ladies Societies, Inc. was recognized as a duly accredited national philanthropic tax exempt organization of the Greek Orthodox Church of North and South America, engaged in extending benevolence to the Greek-American community.

In August of 1944, a special General Assembly of the Philoptochos Society was convened at Saint Basil Academy and a new Constitution was adopted and new By-laws enacted. The next major task was the renovation and furnishings of the Academy's buildings: the main administration building, the Dean's residence, the classrooms and dormitories, the reception hall, and setting up a Chapel and recreation room. Modern equipment was purchased for the kitchen and laundry.

In November, 1948, Archbishop Athenagoras was elected to the highest ecclesiastical office of the Orthodox Church: Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople. He departed for his historic See in January, 1949. During the years that followed Patriarch Athenagoras I bestowed the highest honors of his Ecumenical Throne on several dedicated Philoptochos Ladies by granting them the title of "Archontissa."

During the first twenty years of its existence the Philoptochos Society's major accomplishments were recorded, among which were the Church's most important

institutions: the Holy Cross Theological School (which moved to Brookline, Mass.) and Saint Basil Academy.

Archbishop Michael was elected Primate of the Greek Orthodox Church in the Americas in 1949. Under his spiritual guidance, the Philoptochos continued its mission of humanitarian services. They assisted the Archbishop in establishing the Greek Orthodox Youth of America, and participated in an arduous campaign, launched by the Archbishop, to have the U.S. Government place the initials, G.O. on dog tags to accurately identify Greek Orthodox members of the Armed Forces. This was a remarkable accomplishment by the Greek Orthodox community.

Archbishop Michael, in 1951, placed the administration, budget and supervision of Saint Basil Academy under the Archdiocese. Since its establishment, the Philoptochos had been totally responsible for its operation. The Society continues to this day its dedicated support of the institution.

A new plateau was reached in 1956, when the Philoptochos National Conference, for the first time, was convened simultaneously with the Archdiocesan Clergy-Laity Congress in Washington, D.C. At this Conference the Philoptochos was urged to participate in local chapters of the United Council of Church Women.

At the initiative and leadership of Archbishop Michael, an Old Age Home was founded in Yonkers, N.Y. in 1958. The Society organized many special fund-raising events donating the proceeds to furnish the rooms of the Home. Substantial support from the Ladies Philoptochos Society has continued to the present.

During the Clergy-Laity Congress and Philoptochos Conference in Salt Lake City, Archbishop Michael became ill and returned to New York. He died shortly thereafter. Several months later the Old Age Home was named, "Saint Michael's Home for the Aged" dedicated to the memory of its founder, Archbishop Michael.

The Iakovos Years? For nearly four decades (1959-1996) His Eminence Archbishop Iakovos led the Greek Orthodox faithful in North and South America through the example of his faith, his vigor, his devotion and his ministry. During his tenure as Archbishop, Iakovos was a true innovator with tremendous foresight, keen insight and

an incredible ability to meet the challenges and to take the risks to move beyond the ordinary and predictable, and to create remarkable and noteworthy growth for our Orthodox Church in America.

His Eminence Archbishop Iakovos was an advocate of the victims of hunger, poverty, discrimination and war, and as their champion, he motivated the Ladies of Philoptochos to maintain, encourage and heighten the regard for, and outreach to, the sanctity of the basic rights and needs of all people.

His Eminence was a willing servant of Christ who exhorted the women of Philoptochos to continually strive towards greater service to the Church and to the needy and to always set the highest goals. His love and concern had a significant and positive impact on the growth of the Philoptochos Society. His Eminence encouraged the introduction and adoption of new programs for Philoptochos because he realized the true potential and capacity of this powerful force of devoted and committed women, across our nation.

Archbishop Iakovos's great love for humankind and his sensitivity to human strife and the human condition enabled him to initiate programs to alleviate the hardships and sadness that life brings. The epitome of this love and sensitivity was his commitment to the well being of children, which was realized with new programs initiated under his tenure.

During his thirty-seven years as Archbishop, the National Philoptochos Society continued their miraculous work in this country and beyond. Each challenge was approached with the same determination and distinction shown by the great ladies of our faith for generations!