

**ADDRESS AT BANQUET FOR
ST. SOPHIA FIFTIETH YEAR**

September 28, 2002

by

Father Anthony Kosturos

I begin with the expression of a deep regret. My Presvytera Mary is not with us this evening owing to painful stenosis of the back and trouble with her knees. She deserves to be here more than I. Her profound and steady understanding of the sacrificial nature of the priesthood and her total commitment to family have been the backbone to my serving our Lord and His people fifty four years. She has been always a unique blessing, never complaining about hours or times as I have served. She extends to you warm greetings and the Lord's blessing.

The mindset of St. Sophia today, and in many parishes, stands in marked contrast to the mentality prevalent in the forties and early fifties. Come back with me to that time. You might appreciate even more how far this parish has come since then. Whatever I relate to you this evening is not meant to praise myself. Far be it from me to extol personal virtue. It is an attempt to offer you a glimpse of the past and relate it to the present.

Presvytera and I reached Los Angeles the end of October, 1948. The first persons we met were children and a teacher celebrating Halloween in the small hall behind the church on San Julian Street. I was twenty-three years old. On Sunday, Father Arsenios Palikaris, a retired priest from Oakland, California, officiated at Liturgy. I assisted him. After Liturgy he said: "Son, observe how I conduct the baptism we have this afternoon. Next Sunday, after Liturgy, I am leaving." I asked, "Who is to be pastor?" "I don't know," he replied. I swallowed hard, speechless. For the next three years I was my own assistant, covering this vast Los Angeles basin as well as I could. Was I inexperienced? Obviously. Was I naive, trusting that everyone would respect me because I wore the collar? Naturally. What wishful thinking. Nevertheless, I assure you the Lord's presence and power in my mind and heart provided the strength and determination to do my best, however perceptible my limitations and youthfulness.

Very soon, I discovered the parish, then named Annunciation of the City and County of Los Angeles, had refused to accept the Archdiocese as its higher

church authority. The parish was an entity unto itself, governed by a Board, which gave a priest very little space for initiative and trust, jealously safeguarding its authority.

An illustration of this: A year after I began preaching in church, the presence at Liturgy of english-speaking and American-born youth inspired me to deliver the sermon not only in Greek but also in English. At the next Board meeting, one of the members said: "Mr. President, this young priest has violated Article 2, paragraph 1 of our parish by-laws which states: "The priest of our parish shall transmit the Orthodox Faith in Greek. Last Sunday, he spoke in English." I responded: "There are by-laws superior to the parish's: the Bible. It teaches us to spread the Faith in language people understand." His retort? "Never mind the Bible. We pay you, not the Bible." This hit me in the pit of my stomach. I recovered and said: "If I don't speak in English, I will violate the parish by-laws because I will not be able to spread the Orthodox Faith." Begrudgingly, he and others accepted this as reasonable. What did I do next? I went home and studied those by-laws assiduously in order to anticipate future remarks and reactions. Note that only men were on the Board. Women were not expected to participate.

Another example of Board-power emerged near Christmas. The director of the choir had been absent for some time. The choir urged me to propose to the Board that Fotios Despotopoulos, Frank Desby, become choirmaster. A few Board members resisted this change. They demanded that I bring the entire choir to a meeting to prove this was the choir's wish. The priest's word was not enough. Frank proved to be a musical genius for our Orthodox Church. He is unforgettable. I imagine what some Board members felt at that time. Look at this young, college-looking, beardless, upstart priest making waves.

Now, for the first time, I reveal an event which almost changed my life for good. I was twenty-five years old, two years into my ministry. One Sunday, I was speaking to the Sunday School children about the Pharisee and the tax collector, emphasizing the importance of spiritual humility. A man, short of stature, walks into church with a black case, takes candles from the narthex and begins walking down the middle aisle to light them in front. He is distracting the children. I motion to him to be seated. He gazes at me, then sits. Suddenly, he rises and begins to shout at me. The children are startled. I ask that Board members escort him from the church. At Liturgy's ending, outside the church, a Board member rushes up to me and says: "Father, are you attending the Arcadian luncheon?" "Of course," I reply, "If I were you, I wouldn't go," he says. "That man with the black case has vowed to strike you on the head with his flute. That's what's in that case. He is waiting for you at the luncheon." I decided to go anyway. As I begin to leave the

luncheon, this man rushes up to me in anger, with flute poised in raised right hand to strike. I grasp his flute hand, let him rant and rave until his Vesuvian temper has subsided and, through conversation, manage to calm him. What evidence exists that he may have given me a cerebral hemorrhage? Months later, he was jailed. Why? He blinded a landlord by hitting him with his flute. His disturbing, dissonant playing of the flute had brought the landlord and two friends to the point of exasperation. The landlord threatened to seize his flute from him. Unfortunately, the landlord, unfamiliar with Greek pride, picked on the wrong man. Now, if George, the master musician of Los Angeles County, as he called himself, had struck me and killed me, today I might be gracing the Altar Screen of the Cathedral with the designation: The martyr St. Anthony of the Flute.

Even after the Cathedral opened for Services, many, intensive meetings were held revolving around parish by-laws. Some old timers could not perceive the parish with a new name and accept two tiers of administration, the parish council and the foundation board, established to protect the property of the parish. A court case ensued. The Court decreed that no agreements had been violated with the change and also set historic legal precedent: a Greek Orthodox parish is not self-governing and is responsible to episcopal supervision. The parish did not extricate itself from this mindset of the forties until the late fifties.

At our first Liturgy in the Cathedral, Father Leon, Father Homer and I were perplexed. The church lights suddenly dimmed. Charlie Skouras, whose extraordinary, dedicated fund-raising, coupled with donations from parishioners and raising of funds by the youth for construction of the Cathedral, brought a dimmer box to church. He was controlling the lights from his pew to demonstrate to us, the clergy, how to use lighting for dramatic effect. That was the Hollywood in him.

Another time, it was my turn to preach. My theme? Variety is not just the spice of life. It is the essence of life. I was referring to escalating spiritual levels. Guess who was in church that day? A famous actress with her fourth husband. Later, he assured me he had enjoyed the sermon.

I still remember vividly the melodious rendering of hymns at times when Father Leon, Father Homer and I chanted in three part-harmony. I still recall the sonorous voices of the choir permeating the atmosphere for inspirational worship.

Looking back at my six and one-half years here, beginning at San Julian Street and ending at Normandie and Pico, many lessons about the priesthood and life were learned and many more have been gained in all my years as a priest.

A priest must be strong in character. The flock's respect does not come automatically. When I first became a priest, I was considered an employee. It was necessary to educate our people to understand the priesthood is a calling of divine grace, not simply a profession. It became apparent to me too that you will find persons who respect your sublime role and cooperate, provided you have genuine convictions. This was true of my stay here irrespective of the prevailing secularist attitude toward clergymen by some.

Presvytera and I are grateful to many of you here tonight, as well as to many of the departed, for the love, respect and support shown us from the time of our arrival until we left for San Francisco in 1955. In all candor, I understand now what was difficult to fathom then. The parishioners embraced me as their priest even though I was very young. Most accepted with grace and patience my leaning heavily on their soul at times. I offered them the meat of piety before measuring their capacity to drink the milk of spirituality. If, in the process of expressing that kind of zeal, I over-burdened some of you, tonight I ask for your forgiveness. Know that my motivation was sincere.

My joy being a priest is beyond description. The privilege of serving is a gift cherished for its nobility as well as its surprises. The fact that young people at the old church would wait until 12:30 in the morning to have their confession heard, the fact that at least four hundred persons, mostly youth, gathered at Bovard Auditorium of the USC campus to hear their first-American-board priest lecture on the Liturgy was thrilling. I was privileged to witness the emergence of the post-immigrant, American-born generation of Orthodox. This generation was awakening, yes, awakening to help shape the future of Orthodoxy in the United States. The dawning of a new era for Orthodoxy was not simply a phenomenon. It was a reality.

At Holy Trinity since 1955, I have enjoyed the freedom to give full expression to my priesthood. A priest is a simple human being. Yet, in his capacity as a minister of the Gospel, his life takes on meaningful dimensions. Individuals entrust him with secrets no one else except God will ever know. He humbly shares the journey, offering the redemptive and sanctifying Sacraments of our Church. He realizes human beings engage in comic tragedy and tragic comedy. He counsels with love, focusing on the core of a troubled heart. He listens attentively to the aching soul. He prays with those who hope for a better tomorrow. He perceives that his example of integrity is a beacon to lead many from the darkness of confusion to the light of purposeful living. He urges parish workers to embrace the spirit, not the letter of the law. He inspires them to be respectfully honest with each other, not smooth nor shrewd diplomats. He teaches them by example to be humble, not ego-driven.

Over fifty four years of priesthood, I have come to understand the essence of human nature. It is a paradox. Man is holy and sinful; happy and sad; peaceful and anxious; healthy and sick. This is man's deep, inner struggle in the attempt to acquire consistency in faith directed toward the Lord's ever-presence.

All earthly possessions pale before the importance of our soul. The greatest gift parents offer their children is not the opportunity to be educated nor the chance to advance in business or profession. However useful, necessary and important these pursuits are, the greatest legacy parents give their loved ones is the soul, their personhood, transmitted through birth. Think for a moment how you feel in church or at a cemetery when someone you love dies. As you ponder and mourn the passing of your beloved, the searing stillness and stark silence of death loom quietly within you, irresistibly and pervasively. Time and concerns become meaningless, and our loved one stands alone before our Maker.

It is in our awareness of what death presents us that we reach realistic understanding of how to live. Fame, fortune, property, stocks, bonds, savings accounts are temporary. We know this from experience. We need to remain wholly aware of their transitory nature, however beneficial and satisfying they are to us. We are mortal yet immortal. We are earthfooted yet heavenbound. The nearer we come to God's grace, the better we understand God. Jesus our Lord says: "Whoever believes in me, though he die, shall live, and shall live forever." Jesus never

Presently, with the dynamic leadership of Father John, who possesses broad and diverse talent and experience, St. Sophia has before it the opportunity to widen its horizons of spiritual growth and broaden its circle of social service. May I suggest you give Father John the freedom and peace of mind to work with his associates and you to cultivate inner growth and outer reach. In my view, he is the right person, in the right place, at the right time, the successor to the priests present this evening or absent, each of whom offered all his particular and diverse energies to the development and progress of the Cathedral over a span of fifty years.

May the gold leaf which graces walls of the Cathedral reflect the richness of your faith. May the ornate chandeliers which illuminate the church represent the light of our Lord Jesus shining brightly in your your mind and heart. May the inspirational singing of the choir produce in you melodies of Christian love and understanding. And may we all remind ourselves regularly of what Christians of the very early centuries would say about our destiny: "We are inhabitants of earth but citizens of heaven."