

ST. GEORGE GREEK ORTHODOX CHURCH OF TORONTO
SPIRITUAL DINNER, FEBRUARY 28, 2016

KEYNOTE ADDRESS:

'A WISH FOR GREECE OF 2016: THE END OF DIVISIONS?'

BY

SPYRIDON KOTSOVILIS, Ph.D.

Lecturer

Dept. of Political Science

University of Toronto

Your eminence, Metropolitan Archbishop Sotirios, Father Triantafillos, ladies and gentlemen of the church council and the Philoptochos, distinguished guest, ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to thank you for your presence in today's event.

I want to specially thank Father Triantafillos for his invitation to speak to you, as well as the chairman of the church council, Dr. Grigoris Karakoulas, with whom we discussed the details of this talk.

I am very pleased to be here before you, not only as a guest speaker, but also as a member of our parish. I have been attending our church since my undergraduate years at the University of Toronto, and I am glad to be back to Toronto as a lecturer at the same university where I started, as well as to St. George--as a returning parishioner to the church where I feel I belong.

Let me also note that I am part of the pilot Hellenic Studies Program launched at the University of Toronto; it is supported by the Hellenic Heritage Foundation, the Greek Community, and even the St. George parish, and for that I thank you.

Today the topic of my talk is on the divisions between Greeks throughout their history, and a wish for the Greece of 2016: the end of divisions.

On the eve of its bicentennial anniversary, modern Greece finds itself in a critical state, its society on a razor's edge. For the sixth year it is experiencing a severe economic crisis that has dealt a huge blow to the Greek economy. Its domestic politics continue to be extremely acrimonious, and the external challenges seem to multiply, with the enormous refugee tragedy looming as a new threat to Greece's membership in the European core. Accompanying all of these current malaises also seems to be a broader erosion of values, a sense of weakened national self-consciousness, and perhaps an existential crisis as a people. Seeking to respond to the question about the causes of this long list of setbacks, many have come up with elaborate theories from economics, political science and sociology, etc. However, just a quick look at the history of modern Greece is enough to reveal the answer that has been laying in plain sight: throughout our recent-not to mention medieval and ancient-history, **we, Greeks have always been bitterly divided.**

This talk provides a synopsis of these major fault lines, it asks 'why' Greeks are so divided, and briefly explores whether there is any hope for the Greeks at all.

Let us begin with the Greek war of independence, which was launched in 1821.

One of the particularities of the Greeks was that they somehow managed - amidst the Greek revolution – to carry out at least two civil conflicts. The first one took place from the end of 1823 till the summer of 1824 with the two camps divided between civilian and military leaderships.

After a brief period of compromise, Greeks were divided once again from the summer of 1824 until the beginning of 1825. The divisions were regional but the in-fighting was equally bloody and many were killed.

Meanwhile the ottomans unleashed counter- attacks aiming to crush the revolution, and it was only then that the Greeks – having realized the mortal danger– ended the fighting among themselves.

Despite the fact that the revolution was salvaged – not a moment too soon – by the great international powers of that time, the Greeks wasted no time before continuing with more divisions.

In his efforts to centralize powers in order to build the basic institutions for the new Greek state, the first governor of Greece, Ioannis Kapodistrias, clashed with local interests. As a result, he was assassinated by local clan members in 1832.

Efforts to build the Greek state continued, but soon after another division appeared.

The new state of Greece was small and in no way encompassed the millions of Greeks who lived in the Ottoman Empire, in Constantinople, Macedonia, Cyprus, etc.

Since the early 1840s we come across the rift between the Greeks who had citizenship in the tiny new state – known as *autochtones* (indigenous)- and those who were born outside the mainland, for example those from Smyrna in Asia Minor – the *heterochtones* (foreign-born). While both were considered Greek, full privileges in Greece (like obtaining a civil service post) were enjoyed by the locals, which were differentiated by all others. This two-tier preferential system created resentment that was carried forward and fortified other divisions to come.

Another example from the second half of the nineteenth century saw Greeks being divided between the followers of two politicians: the modernizer and reform-minded Trikoupis and the populist Diligiannis. According to sources, when Diligiannis was asked ‘*What are your policies?*’ His reply was simple: ‘*The exact opposite of those of Trikoupis.*’

This kind of black-or-white rhetoric and politics forced citizens to embrace the mentality ‘you are either with us, or against us’. This however contributed to political rifts within Greek society which would only grow larger with time.

Late last year marked the centennial of the *National Schism*, which took place during the First World War. At stake was whether Greece would join the war and if so, which coalition would it side with.

The king (who had family ties to the German emperor and was conservative) wanted Greece to remain neutral. Venizelos, who sided with the British and the French thought otherwise. So, when the two leaders reached an impasse, Venizelos resigned and established a parallel government in Thessaloniki. Monarchists attacked Venizelists in the streets of Athens, while Venizelists attacked monarchists in Thessaloniki. Blood was spilled, and many were killed as a result of this division. In the end, in 1917 king Constantine was forced by the allies to go into exile and Prime Minister Venizelos returned to Athens. Greece joined the allies and was among the victors of World War I.

With these positive results, one would assume that all would be forgotten, yet the atmosphere just before Venizelos called new elections in 1920- was toxic. Indicative of the deep chasm is a statement by Venizelos' political opponents at the time:

"We will use all means possible; we will bury him electorally even if he succeeds to expand Greek territories to include Constantinople."

The result was the surprise-defeat of Venizelos who decided to withdraw. But even then society remained polarized, and his replacement by an inferior - in terms of diplomacy - leadership took over and continued the war in Anatolia around Smyrna, with a tragic conclusion of the Asia Minor disaster of 1922.

The hatred that emerged from this divide and its results was to poison the Greek political scene for decades.

Those who thought that, after the national schism and the Asia Minor disaster, which uprooted 1.3 million Greeks from their ancestral homes, and contributed to extreme political turbulence, nothing worse could befall the Greeks were soon proven bitterly wrong.

With World War II came the Greek-Italian war of 1940-1. Greeks performed heroically, but then came the Nazi invasion, the harsh occupation and the terrible famine which claimed 100,000 lives only within the winter of 1941. Worse, with them came a new civil war.

From 1943 – amidst the war and the resistance – we have the beginning of the Greek civil war between different resistance groups who, besides fighting the Nazis, also fought among themselves to jockey into position to succeed them when they leave.

Close to the end of the war, when it became clear that the Nazis would leave, Greece – for a third time in its modern history (after the civil wars of 1823-5 and the national schism) – found itself with more than one governments. The elected one, in exile in Cairo, the puppet one in Athens, and the one of the mountains.

Efforts to reconcile all these political differences between groups proved pointless, and after a bloody clash in the battle of Athens, and an uneasy truce, a second round of the civil war began. It lasted from 1946 until the defeat of the communist guerilla fighters in 1949-a defeat to which first the British and then the Americans contributed greatly.

One cannot emphasize enough the cost of this major division: there were over 30,000 deaths and 20,000 captured, as well as many political refugees and economic immigrants. The initial destruction of the country following the brutal Nazi occupation was completed: its infrastructure was wiped out, whole villages were ruined and deserted, cities were damaged, families were decimated, and brother turned against brother.

It is particularly difficult for a society to recover after a trauma as grave as a civil war.

And while Greece remarkably managed to restore itself economically in the post-war period, politically however a deep rift remained and expanded. Combined with the cold war in Europe, the civil war and the ideological divide continued to cast a dark shadow and the society was now permanently divided between the supporters of the right and those of the left. This contributed to turbulent parliamentary politics for two decades, as each successive, bitterly fought election brought about even more polarization, eroding democratic practices and paving the way for worse.

The military regime of 1967 and its dictatorial rule for seven years hardly needs any introduction or elaboration. But it also helps illustrate the serious divisions among Greeks and their catastrophic results.

The case in point is the military regime's involvement in the divisive politics of recently independent Cyprus. There, Greek-Cypriots were divided over its direction—should it remain independent or seek to unite with Greece? The Greek junta selected to continuously undermine the Greek-Cypriot government headed by president Makarios. This culminated in a coup d'état engineered in the summer of 1974 by the generals in Athens that aimed to remove Makarios, install a puppet government and precipitate the union of Cyprus with Greece. All it did however, was to give Turkey the excuse to invade the island, which resulted in over 2000 dead, 1500 missing, the uprooting of two hundred thousands of Greek-Cypriots from their homes, and the de facto partition of the island. Here is another tragic example of dissention, disharmony, discord and the disaster it brought to divided Greeks.

The Metapolitefsi years –that is, the period of democratic transition and consolidation in Greece after 1974–started off with good omens. These were the resolutions of other two major, chronic rifts among Greeks – the issue of monarchy and of language. After a referendum, Greeks decided on a parliamentary democracy, and soon after the government formalized the change from archaic Greek to the modern demotic Greek language we hear among Greeks today.

However, the 1980s plunged Greece back the rifts of the past, especially since the political protagonists were major politicians from the turbulent 1960s. The political clash between the socialist prime minister Andreas Papanderou and the conservative opposition leader Constantine Mitsotakis revived the pre-dictatorship era animosity, brewed political polarization, brought further political instability and—of course—agitated political cleavages. Greeks were again divided bitterly and the result was mutual recriminations, back-to-back elections, and the criminalization of politics, complete with special court-hearings for scandals. The late Greek statesman Constantine Karamanlis said it best: *“You do not send your political opponent to the court; you send them home.”* [i.e., you defeat them electorally and they retire] Indeed, if you do the former, you only exacerbate political divisions.

And then, Greece found itself in the new millennium, amidst a deep financial crisis. At least since 2008 it has experienced violent demonstrations, growing political violence, and a new socio-political cleavage between pro- and anti-memorandum (that is austerity and bail out) forces. To an alarming extent this is also translating into a pro-Europeanist and anti-Europeanist split, that, as recent polls indicate, is growing. In other words, more divisions. And if one needed proof that divisions in Greek society run disturbingly deep, one need not look further than at the very divisive current political discourse and rhetoric that for the first time in Greek politics includes terms from the civil war.

If you think this trait of deep division is only a contemporary characteristic of the Greeks I am afraid I have more bad news for you. In fact it is a unifying thread that connects modern to medieval to ancient Greeks. Greeks were divided during ottoman times, and further back during the byzantine era, from its final decades, to the iconoclasm, and all the way back to emperor Justinian and the beginning of the empire. And, naturally, one can certainly go back to ancient Greek times, to the iconic first major civil conflict that Greeks managed to hold-the Peloponnesian war.

Divisions extend not only through time, but also through space. Around the world, Greek diaspora is robust, but often contentious relations prevail. It seems division is one of our ethnic traits.

So, let's admit it: we are a people of deep divisions.

But **why**?

Political science tries to approach such questions from multiple perspectives: it looks at institutions, elites and political culture, and in all three of these Greeks fare poorly.

Political and social institutions in Greece (with the exception of the family and the church) are weak, and encourage Greeks not to follow laws and rules. Their weakness, as in the constitutional ambiguity about who –the king or the prime minister- decides on foreign policy in 1915 greatly contributed to the national schism.

Greek leaders and elites have also been problematic. Often stubborn and dogmatic they invited conflict instead of compromise. The people just followed their lead. One can add to this list, the Greek political culture: it has been one of lack of cooperation, lack of respect for domestic institutions, lack of respect for political opponents. A political culture that rewards extreme positions over moderate ones certainly adds to divisions.

Finally, there is the foreign factor. For a variety of reasons, great powers were always interested in Greece and often intervened. Locals followed these cues, also took positions for or against one power or the other, and divided accordingly.

So far we looked at some of the reasons why Greeks are divided.

But for me an equally important question is how come we have managed to survive and achieve good things despite our deep divisions?

My response to this question is a simple one: faith

It is the **faith** that material considerations of power come terribly short in front of one's spiritual strength.

It is the **faith** that after the passion and the crucifixion, comes the resurrection.

It is the faith which promises us that even if we have faith the size of a mustard seed, we can move mountains. With which nothing is impossible.

This is the faith with which illiterate peasants in the Peloponnese rose up in early 19th century against the mighty Ottoman Empire.

This is the faith that after a decade of war, occupation, famine and civil conflict, propelled an utterly destroyed Greece to regenerate and rebuilt.

This is the faith that restored democracy in Greece after the dictatorship.

This is the faith that enabled hundreds of thousands of immigrants to kiss their families goodbye, embark on a ship voyage of weeks on end to a new country without language skills in order to provide a better future for them and their families.

This is the faith that has made the Greek diaspora worldwide one of the most successful, accomplished and influential ones in the world.

This is the faith that gave us this church, the one we keep growing and the one we keep returning to.

This is the faith that despite our different paths and difficulties in life, has us being present here today, still standing, ever striving and praying.

What we have accomplished, as Greeks over the centuries, with huge sacrifice, pain and suffering, we have done so because of faith.

And that is despite the fact that the microbe of divisions still lurks within. Imagine then, with the faith that distinguishes us, how much more we could achieve if we also manage to set aside all these destructive impulses of division.

2016 is already a very difficult year for Greece, with the continued economic stagnation and the growing refugee crisis combining to brew the perfect storm.

To be able to survive this extremely difficult ordeal we certainly need faith. But we also need unity.

This is, then, the wish for the Greece of 2016: The end of divisions.

Thank you very much