

ST. NICHOLAS - GROUND ZERO

Our American 'Parthenon'

In her remarkable new book, *The Parthenon Enigma*, classical archaeologist Joan Breton Connelly fortuitously highlights the similarity between the rebuilding of the World Trade Center in the wake of 9/11, and the construction of that most famous of human monuments, the Parthenon.

In the Persian sack of Athens in 480 B.C., the older Parthenon, roughly in the same spot and yet unfinished, was destroyed in the fires that swept over the Acropolis. She writes of the motivations of Periclean Athens, a generation later, to rebuild the Parthenon:

"[The Athenians] wanted to leave their own children something more than a citadel in ruins, a barren ground zero that fossilized the bitter memories of defeat. It was time to forge a new narrative for the city, one of Athenian triumph and supremacy, a visual tribute to its miraculous rise from the ashes." (page 84, emphasis added)

A city that had witnessed its own ruin and ultimate victory over a foreign invader considered the rebirth of the place, where the worst had been done, a sacred task. Whether the Athens of 2,500 years ago, or the New York in our own day, the motivation to rebuild has never been about putting a horrific past behind us. It is about enshrining the memory of the legacy of the attack, and the subsequent sacrifice and heroism, in a temple that will tell the tale to generations yet to come. Whether it was the Parthenon then or St. Nicholas now, the shared embodiment of memory and triumph is the same.

Our Holy Archdiocese of America is building more than a parish church that was destroyed in the attacks of September 11, 2001. We -- all of us -- are building a Shrine of memory and honor for the human spirit and to glory of God. We are building our American Parthenon.

By coincidence, Santiago Calatrava, the architect of the new St. Nicholas Church at Ground Zero, was in Athens on September 11, 2001.

As he reflected years later: "Early that afternoon, I was confronted by the images broadcast out of New York. Horrified by the magnitude of the tragedy, I sat transfixed, unable to move until well into the night. Days later, as I walked through the Plaka - the ancient quarter in Athens - the walls of the Acropolis recalled the previous days' images. The first Acropolis was destroyed in the 5th century BC when Athens was invaded and burnt to the ground. Athens and its Acropolis were rebuilt.

"The relics of the original structures were collected and carefully entombed. The columns of the original Parthenon were saved, and reused to buttress the walls of the new Acropolis. To me, these columns link the tragedy and triumph of ancient Athens, and testify to man's innate capacity to overcome such events.... The reconstruction of the Acropolis marked the beginning of the golden age of Greek civilization. Not only did art, philosophy, and poetry flourish, but Democracy, as we know it today, was born. May the reconstruction of Ground Zero encourage us, and our children to such noble achievements."

The responsibility for raising the new St. Nicholas at Ground Zero, while not on the same physical scale as the Parthenon, is clearly on the same moral and societal level. Pericles began construction of the Parthenon in 447 B.C., a few years after the transfer of the treasury of the Athenian



League from the sacred island of Delos to Athens. That incredible amount was 8,000 talents, or nearly \$5 billion in contemporary terms.

Then, with the cooperation and consent of all the citizens of Athens, more than 5 percent of this total (around \$280 million) was spent building the Parthenon over a 16-year period.

Dr. Manolis Korres, the foremost scholar on the archaeology of the Athenian Acropolis and chief architect of the Acropolis Restoration Project, has written extensively on the difficulties of building this masterpiece. (See his *"From Pentelicon to the Parthenon"* and *"The Stones of the Parthenon"*).

In all, more than 100,000 tons of

marble were moved the 10 long miles from Mount Pentelikon to the Acropolis. It is an engineering feat that could be said to surpass the pyramids of Egypt! The citizens of Athens were deeply engaged in this extraordinary effort, leaving an example for us.

In order to complete the St. Nicholas Church at Ground Zero, the same shoulder-to-shoulder effort is required from the 'citizens' of our "polis" -- "a city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God" (Hebrews 11:10). All across our great nation, Greek Orthodox communities embody the living "City of God" a "politeia" that is based in the salvific labor of sacrificial love and compassion that our Lord Jesus Christ completed on His Precious Cross and through His Glorious Resurrection. Indeed, the rebuilding of St. Nicholas is an act borne out of the Passion of our nation on 9/11, and will only be consummated by the resurrection of our National Shrine.

Every member of our Church has a stake in the rebuilding of St. Nicholas Church at Ground Zero, just as every Athenian citizen had a stake in rebuilding the Parthenon. Every gift and donation to this effort, however great or small, serves to move us closer to constructing our American Parthenon, a temple of memory and honor.

Unlike the temple that towers to this day above the Agora of Athens and the hustle and bustle of the city below, St. Nicholas will stand among the vertiginous heights of commerce and industry that will be the new World Trade Center. Tower One, formerly called the "Freedom Tower" and a brief walk from the site of the church, is the tallest building in the United States. And yet, as has been pointed out in these pages before, St. Nicholas will rest in an elevated park, a little 'acropolis', if you will. And from its height of a mere 25 feet, it will look down into the Memorial waterfalls set within the footprints of the Twin Towers.

As Santiago Calatrava, has observed, the absences created by the voids of the Memorial Pools will be balanced by the presence of the Church. Absence and presence. Absence of those whose lives were lost that fateful day. Presence of hope over adversity, triumph in the face of destruction, and love that is victorious over hatred and evil.

It is perhaps no accident of history that that the Athena Victory (Nike) Temple is the first structure that confronts the visitor to the Acropolis, and that the meaning of "Nicholas" is "the Victory of the People" (*e nike tou laou*).

Just as the Parthenon reminded the ancient Athenians of the price for their freedom, so too shall the St. Nicholas Shrine at Ground Zero remind the American people that our most treasured freedom is that of religious belief according to our conscious, and that mutual respect for all religions is the only way to live in a world without war and violence.



To donate

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at Ground Zero Fund:
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