

# ST. NICHOLAS - GROUND ZERO

## A Tale of Three Churches: Part 2

### Conclusion

Nearly 1,800 years ago, a famous man sardonically asked: "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?" As Orthodox Christians, we know there is an answer and that answer is "Very much!" In the same way, we have seen that New York City has much to do with Jerusalem – as the world's two most famous cenotaphs are located in each. But we began last issue with three churches in our tale, and it is time now to include that third house of the Lord, and to behold how all three are intertwined in the work of salvation and history.

St. Nicholas Church at Ground Zero draws its most fundamental inspiration from the church that for more than a thousand years was not only the largest church structure in the world, but was among the largest structures of any kind, Hagia Sophia.

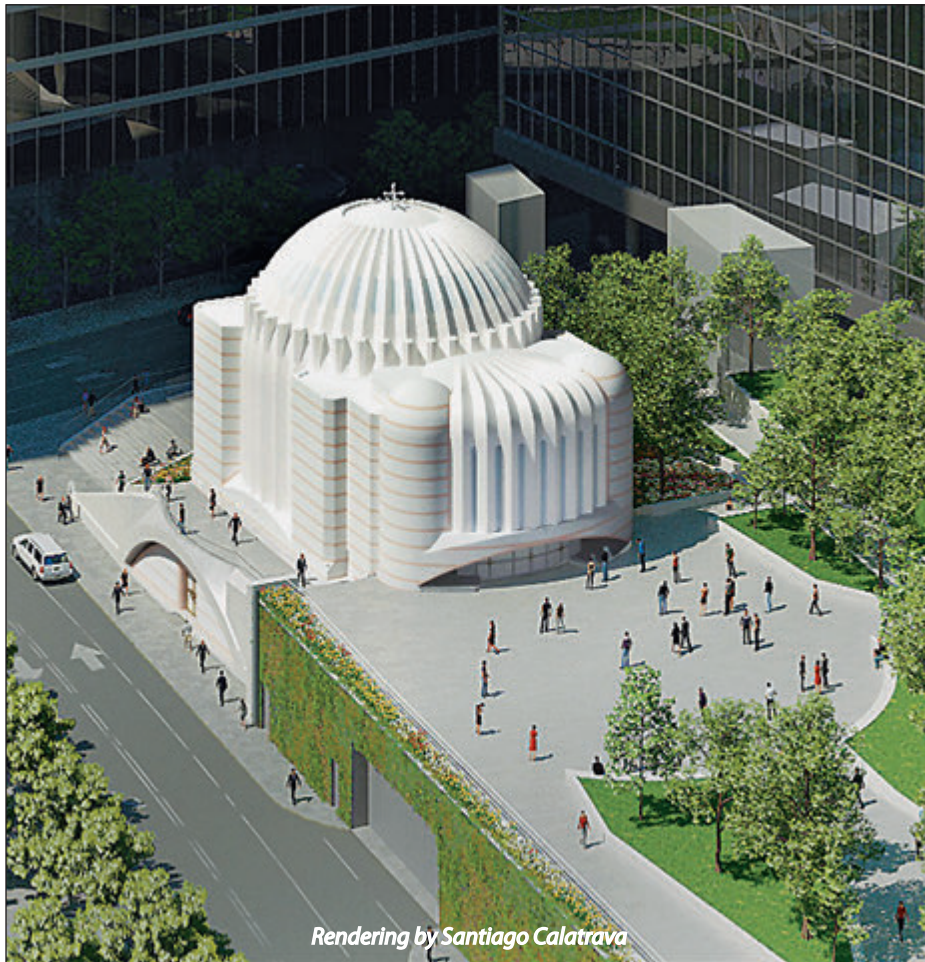
But unlike the pyramids of the pharaohs, Hagia Sophia was a living, breathing building – the cathedral of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople for nearly one thousand years.

Hagia Sophia, the Church of Holy Wisdom, was named in honor of our Lord Jesus Christ, who is the Wisdom (Sophia) of God, and the Word (Logos) of God. Through the centuries after its completion (when Justinian is said to exclaimed, "Solomon, I have outdone thee!"), many other churches were inspired by it, but none equaled it. Thus, it came to be known as the "Great Church of Christ," an epithet worthily used to this day for the Ecumenical Patriarchate.

Santiago Calatrava's design for St. Nicholas Church at Ground Zero was inspired by Hagia Sophia. The forty ribs in the dome of the original will be mirrored in forty ribs in the dome of St. Nicholas. The dedication to filling the space with ethereal light is the same in each. Obviously, there can be no comparison of physical size, but there can be notice of worldwide significance. Hagia Sophia was built as an act of love and worship for our Creator, Who loved us first and so much that He gave His Only-Begotten Son for us. St. Nicholas was destroyed in a senseless act of violence and hatred, but is being rebuilt as a witness to love and worship, and as a sign that true religion and faith is creative and produces love, mercy and hope.

Where St. Nicholas and Hagia Sophia intersect with history comes through the Anastasis, the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem.

As is well known, when Constanti-



Rendering by Santiago Calatrava

nople fell to the Ottoman Muslims on May 29, 1453, followed by three days of pillaging and murder, the Great Church was forcibly converted into a mosque. This remained true until 1935, when Hagia Sophia became a museum in the wake of the secularization of the Turkish State and the aftermath of the collapse of the Ottoman Empire at the end of World War I.

What a different course happened for the Anastasis in Jerusalem. After the Siege of Jerusalem in 637 by Muslim armies pouring out of the Arabian Peninsula, the sainted Patriarch Sophronios agreed to surrender the Holy City only to the Caliph, Omar. Omar traveled to Jerusalem and was received by the Patriarch, who showed him the Church of the Holy Sepulchre where he invited Omar to pray. Omar respectfully declined saying that if he did, his men would seize the Church for themselves. Instead he prayed across the courtyard, and to this day, the mosque there is called "the Mosque of Omar."

The irony of the present day is there is

now a push from government quarters in Turkey to once again seize Hagia Sophia and use it as a mosque. Unfortunately, this has already happened to the site of the Seventh Ecumenical Council, Hagia Sophia in Nicea (modern Iznik,) and the 12<sup>th</sup> century Hagia Sophia, a masterpiece of Byzantine architecture in Trebizond (modern Trabzon).

Both in Nicea and Trebizond the churches were museums, and the local populations wanted them to remain so. The government pushed the "Islamization" of these monuments as what seems to be part of a greater program of not only further restricting religious minorities in Turkey, but advancing an Islamic state. There were few outcries when Nicea and Trebizond were seized. But now, with the Hagia Sophia the whole world knows what is at stake, we are beginning to hear the

voices of religious leaders, academics, art scholars, and journalists – and in Turkey as well.

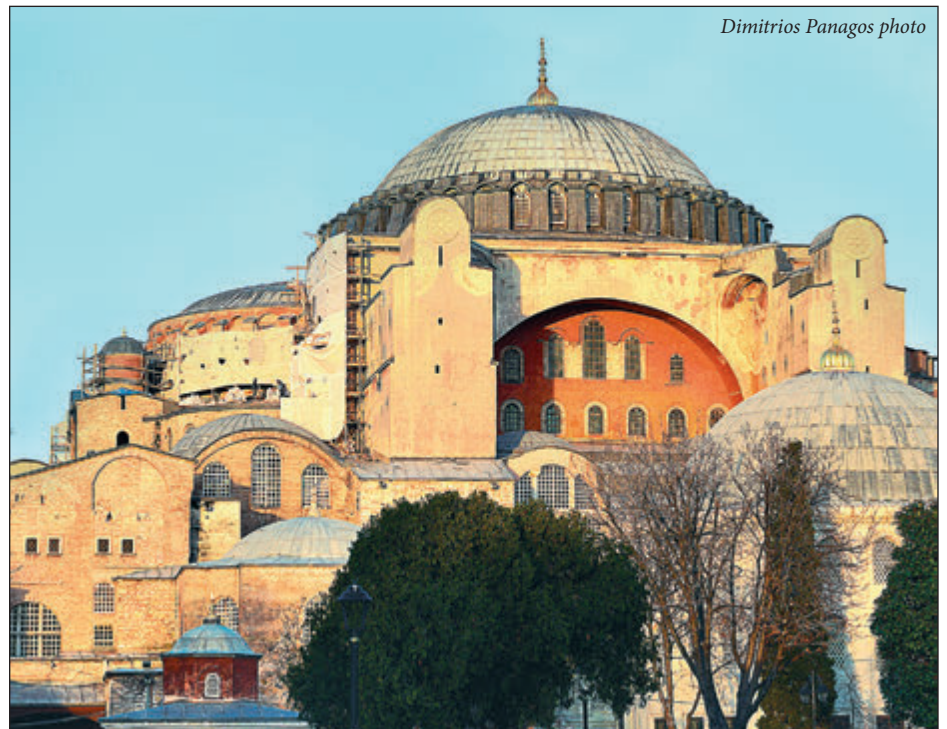
Add to this the contrast of the Archdiocese's stance toward the so-called "Mosque at Ground Zero" – the Park 51 Islamic Center and Mosque – just two blocks from Ground Zero. During the controversy about whether the mosque had the legal right to be so close to the World Trade Center site, the Archdiocese stood affirmed the constitutional right of the mosque to be in this location, even when some government authorities were attempting to derail the rebuilding of St. Nicholas at Ground Zero! While we questioned the wisdom and the appropriateness of the decision of the mosque to locate so close to the open wound of 9/11, we nevertheless affirmed our values of freedom of religion and mutual respect.

The Church stood on principle then. And it stands on principle now. For the Church is built on the Rock, and that Rock is Christ.

We will not sit idly or quietly by while Hagia Sophia is threatened once again by those who would appropriate its power for a cause not its own. It was built to worship the Holy Trinity, and as His All Holiness has said and Archbishop Demetrios has reiterated, if it is to be a house of worship again, it must be an Orthodox Christian house of worship. And we also recognize that legacy from Jerusalem so many centuries ago. There is room in our world for everyone.

Let St. Nicholas Church at Ground Zero be a beacon of religious tolerance and interfaith dialogue, open to all who come in peace and respect. Let the rebuilding of this Greek Orthodox church, destroyed by religious hatred, be an act of redemption, and act creation, and ultimately an act of love for all the peoples of the world. Thus would our tale of three churches finally come to a happy conclusion.

**To donate**  
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Dimitrios Panagos photo