

Greek Orthodox Rally Support for Troubled Home

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Eleni Psaras of Brooklyn, a member of the National Philoptochos Society, distributed food at a shelter in Athens in 2010.
Credit Dimitrios Panagos

On Religion

By SAMUEL G. FREEDMAN

Dosed up on Tylenol and Advil after three days in bed with the flu, Valerie Markou paced the terrazzo floor of a catering hall in Queens. She carried a gold paper shopping bag, selling the raffle tickets it contained and tucking away the \$20 bills she received in return.

All around Ms. Markou on a recent Monday afternoon, 300 guests mingled, sending up a pleasant thrum of chatter. Some admired the banquet hall's chandeliers. Some lingered over the display of raffle prizes. Some sipped delicately from the wine at the round tables.

For all the conviviality, the underlying task was grave. On Martin Luther King's Birthday, a holiday that has become synonymous with service, these guests from a single outpost of the Greek diaspora had gathered in the guise of celebration to raise relief money for their homeland, impoverished and destabilized by an economic crisis entering its sixth year.

"Our mother country needs us," said Ms. Markou, a travel agent in Brooklyn. "And who else should help but America? This is the country that educated me. This is the country that put food on my table. We'd help any country in need. And Greece is the country of my ancestors."

It was no accident that her efforts were taking place under the aegis of the Greek Orthodox Church, one of the primary institutions linking Greece to more than a million Greek-Americans. Long before anyone talked about globalization in its high-tech context, the denomination served as a superhighway for the Greek diaspora, with immigrants traveling outward and, in times of dire need, humanitarian assistance flowing inward.

On its own and through related charities and local churches, the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America has sent \$4 million in aid to Greece since 2009. Archbishop Demetrios, its primate, has personally delivered \$700,000 of that amount on three visits to Greece since 2012.

“The current response does not in any way represent only the present,” said Alexandros Kyrou, a historian at Salem State University in Massachusetts. “There’s a very strong relationship between Greece and Greek-Americans, who are the most dynamic part of the diaspora. This relationship even predates the establishment of the Greek state.”

Like her friends Eleni Psaras and Stella Panagakos, Ms. Markou has been an active member of the National Philoptochos Society, a philanthropic organization of Greek Orthodox women. The luncheon, which aimed to raise \$30,000 for children’s shelters in Greece, was sponsored by five Philoptochos chapters in Brooklyn and Staten Island.

As members of the Philoptochos unit at their church, Holy Cross in the Bay Ridge section of Brooklyn, Ms. Markou and the others have made four relief trips to Greece since late 2008, delivering thousands of dollars and tons of clothing, and witnessing a societal calamity none of them had expected in this century.

Having spent itself into a budget deficit of about 15 percent and then been pressured into an austerity regimen by the European Union, Greece has seen disposable income plummet by 40 percent since 2008. Unemployment has reached almost 30 percent. Among children, the level of “food insecurity,” meaning hunger or the imminent risk of it, tops 50 percent in the poorest sections of the nation.

“People went back to raising chickens, pigs,” said Ms. Psaras, who immigrated to America as a teenager in 1969 and is now a real estate broker. “I called my friend the other day, she told me, ‘I got a goat.’ No one uses oil to heat their house. My sister-in-law told me she has wood. People go to farms to chop wood.”

An embodiment of the protracted crisis sat at the Holy Cross luncheon table in the form of Markella Antoniou, 29, the girlfriend of Ms. Psaras’s son. After earning a master’s degree in molecular medicine from a British university, Ms. Antoniou came to New York looking for work.

“Most of my friends are living in Germany or England,” she said. “They have master’s degrees, but if they go back to Greece, they end up working in video clubs, in tourism. If you’re in business or medicine, there are no jobs.”

The slow-motion cataclysm of Greece presents a challenge to the tradition of diasporic aid, Dr. Kyrou said. During both world wars, the suffering of Greeks was abrupt and apparent. No rational person could blame the victims for what they endured at the hands of Ottoman opponents and Axis occupiers.

Over the course of the wartime periods, both religious and secular organizations provided humanitarian assistance as part of umbrella coalitions such as the Relief Committee for Greeks of Asia Minor and the Greek War Relief Association. In addition to the Greek Orthodox Church, Greek-Americans involved in import-export businesses were also particularly well suited to help funnel relief.

The current economic crisis, however, has unfolded and persisted over a period of years. It has been accompanied by a public narrative that blames the Greek people for being spendthrifts and tax dodgers and characterizes the harsh results of austerity as some kind of moral tonic.

“The crisis isn’t as immediate as an invasion,” Dr. Kyrou said. “It has been slow in gaining its momentum, but it’s now reached a crushing level. But it is no less of a humanitarian crisis than the ones in the past, and it needs the kind of humanitarian response Greek-Americans have provided in the past.”

The women of Holy Cross have struggled to get across precisely that point. In previous years, the Philoptochos luncheon raised money for people with AIDS, children with autism, breast cancer research and library construction. The decision to commit this year’s intake to Greece, even specifically to needy children, faced some internal opposition.

Ms. Psaras has found herself frequently assuring donors that the aid will be hand-delivered to shelters and families rather than being passed through government channels. And, she invariably adds, she and the other volunteers are paying their own way.

“By us going there,” she said in a recent conversation, “we give them ... ”

Ms. Markou, standing nearby, finished the sentence: “... a little hope and comfort.”