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### **Greek Customs in Modern America**

Four generations of Greek immigrants have fashioned the rich history of Greek-American life in modern America. In the mid 1850's the first Greeks began arriving at Ellis Island and quickly found work, most as laborers at first. Many found work in the construction and railroad industries, while the more resourceful opened up their own businesses in the major cities of New York, Washington DC and Chicago. Many of the entrepreneurial Greeks opened up shop as hatters, tailors or shoe repairmen. This significant culture, which has slowly been forgotten over the generations, has been shaped by strong faith in God and Church, strict family life and a great deal of hard work.

### **The Greek Orthodox Church**

The Greek Orthodox Church is an important part of the Greek-American's life. Orthodoxy began with Christ's twelve disciples. After Christ's disciples were given the authority to spread the gospel throughout the land, they traveled extensively over what we now call Greece, establishing Churches along the way. These churches created the Christians of the Greek orthodox faith. Today the same traditions, beliefs, and customs of the past remain strictly intact.

The architecture of the classic Greek Orthodox Church is awe-inspiring, with its huge domed ceilings; classic cross-shaped design and its beautiful marble and gold interior. This design is called Byzantine architecture and is intended to give the visitor a sense that God is present in the place of worship. The three main elements of the church are the narthex, nave and the sanctuary. The narthex or the entrance is where people prepare for worship. It contains candles and icons. The candles are lit in honor of Christ and saints. If

you arrive late the scene is terrific, there will be hundreds of tall skinny candles lit and stuck in the sand. The narthex is purposely left dimly illuminated to add to the experience when the candles are lit. The nave is where the church body sits during the service. The floor symbolizes earth and the beautifully decorated dome represents Heaven. The sanctuary is the stage or pulpit from where the priest gives his singing and chanting sermon, which is usually spoken half in Greek and half in English. The sanctuary is always on the east side of the church because Jesus will return in the east. The sanctuary is separated from the nave by the *ikonostasion*, a wall of life size icons usually made of mosaic tile or fresco style paintings. Only clergy and male church members are allowed past the *ikonostasion*.

### **The Seven Sacraments**

The seven sacraments are the most important services that define the Greek orthodox life. They consist of Baptism, Chrismation, Confession, Communion, Marriage, Holy Unction, and Holy Orders.

Baptism and Chrismation are performed consecutively. Baptism is done first and just like the rest of the sacraments, is only performed by a priest in good standing with the church. The original sin that was committed by Adam and Eve is wiped away with baptism. With the priest, child and godparent present the child is anointed with oil and dipped in the water three times. The second sacrament, chrismation is when the child receives the Holy Spirit. The priest anoints the baby with blessed oil and cuts three locks of hair from the child. The clothes of the child are then blessed and put on the child along with a gold necklace and cross.

The third sacrament of marriage is filled with happiness, music, dancing and wonderful food. The customs are traditional and encompass many of the same ones that Americans use, such as asking parental permission, engagement parties, and wedding

showers. The rules that marriage is subject to are strict and numerous. The music played, the words spoken and actions taken cannot be altered in any way, except for a few that require the permission of a bishop. Music during the ceremony can only be chanting or performed by an organ. Mixed marriages are only permitted when the non-orthodox partner is a baptized Christian, and the couple agrees to baptize their children in the Greek Orthodox Church.

The sacrament of confession is used to assist the believer when they have committed serious sins and need the guidance of a more spiritual person. In these cases the sin should still be confessed before God and the priest should be consulted afterward for specific instructions about how to repent from the sin. Confession is not meant to replace confession to God but rather to give Christians a practical solution to a serious problem.

Communion is the reenactment of the last supper. The bread and wine make up the Eucharist, which is the body and blood of Christ. The Holy Spirit transforms the bread and wine into the Eucharist while the church is bowing during the liturgy. Traditionally only people who have been baptized in the Greek Orthodox Church are allowed to take communion and a priest should be consulted before taking it if a serious sin has been committed. Communion should be taken as often as the church offers it. As a general rule no food or drink should be consumed after the midnight before communion is received.

Once a year on the Holy Wednesday during Holy Week the Holy Unction is performed on the entire parish. The Holy Unction is a physical and mental healing with holy oil blessed by the Holy Spirit. It is also used in special private situations for extremely ill people. The oil is put on the face of the believer in the shape of a cross and provides comfort to all who participate.

The Holy Orders are the traditions and customs passed down since Christ was on this earth and selected his first 12 Holy teachers, also known as the 12 disciples. It is the process by which the existing Holy Men choose their successors. Minor Holy orders include the induction of chanters and altar boys. Holy Orders for priests state that candidates must be male, have strong faith, and a graduate degree from a theological school is preferred. The Holy Orders also state the proper etiquette and relations priests should have when dealing with lay people and vice versa.

### **Saints and Icons**

Saints are honored at each service for the nearly impossible achievements they accomplished. They are honored in many ways, through prayer, song, and most popularly through icons. Icons can range in size and elegance but very few are created in an anything but an elegant manner. They usually are made up of precious metals and depict the saint in a Christ-like way, with glaring eyes, long narrow nose and large ears.

Icons have rich meaning they are meant to transform the saints into god like divine beings. They help spectators reach into the heavenly realm with fantastic symbolism and beautiful artwork. In the past icons have caused controversy because it was thought that people worshiped them as God and because many icons depicted God which many people thought was unacceptable. Monks and nuns are traditional iconographers (ones who create icons), and are trained by pious holy fathers in sacred monasteries around the world.

### **Purposeful Living**

Family, religion, education, pride, honor and a strong work ethic is what distinguishes the Greek American from any other culture. Family and religion are the most important parts of any Greek American's life. The families are supportive and devoted toward all generations. Children revere their elders and parents make great sacrifices for

their children. It is common for elderly parents to move in with their children when they need assisted living. The church instills and supports this strong family unit. The church serves social and cultural requirements as well as religious. They are a place for meeting similar people as well as worshipping God. The Greek Orthodox Church is the common thread that helps keep Greeks unified. It facilitates ethnic pride, honor and promotes interest in further education. As with most immigrants they come to America for economic reasons. The Greeks came here looking for opportunity and were willing to work hard to achieve success. Their strict work ethic is what has contributed to their great accomplishments in America.

In order for the family name to live on through the generations it is customary for the children to be named after their grandparents. First names are usually named after the paternal grandfather and grandmother. Middle names are usually the first name of the father or the middle name of the paternal grandfather. Parents are encouraged by the church to name their children after a significant saint that has a desirable trait that you would like the child to use as a role model.

In order to facilitate the perpetuation of the Greek culture in America the Orthodox Church sponsors Greek school. Children are taught all sorts of things at Greek school about their native language, faith, and culture. It is a tradition that dates back almost five hundred years when these schools were hidden in caves from the repressive Turkish rulers in Greece. Today these schools encompass over 40,000 students at nearly 500 schools in America.<sup>1</sup>

### **Greek Food – More Than Just a Meal**

In the Greek home, meals are an important part of life for all ages. It is a time for the older generations to discuss politics and daily events, for the younger generation it is an

occasion to have fun. There will always be enough for seconds and thirds at the dinner table; in the Greek home nobody goes hungry. You will not be able to finish a meal without being offered more. The staples of the Greek diet include, bread, cheese, olives, olive oil, oregano, eggs, lemon and phillo (paper-thin dough used in layers in many dishes and desserts).

There are holidays year around for the Greeks to celebrate and have their wonderful feasts. The major ones are the same ones that the Americans observe with the exception of Easter. Greek Easter falls on a different date each year. The old Julian calendar determines the date for Greek Easter. It always falls on the first Sunday after the first full moon following the vernal equinox<sup>2</sup>. Typically that means it is usually celebrated with in a week or two of American Easter.

## **Conclusion**

It has been over one hundred and fifty years since the first Greeks set foot on American soil and the culture has only changed slightly. They are some of the hardest working and most successful entrepreneurial immigrants entering America today. Today many Greeks have found opportunities to share their heritage with America by opening up excellent restaurants serving classic Greek cuisine. Over the years there has been a slowly waning interest in remaining a “Greek American” in the modern American culture, but pride is by far gone. Any Greek you meet will tell you that he or she is proud of their rich heritage and the majority can even give you details about who were the first ones in the family to arrive.

## **Endnotes**

1. Marilyn Rouvelas. “A Guide to Greek Customs in America.” Nea Attiki Press. (October 1996): 174-175.

2. Marilyn Rouvelas. "A Guide to Greek Customs in America." Nea Attiki Press. (October 1996): 257

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