

“We’re Back!”

HYP Community Gathers at the Harvard Club to Welcome the Return of Annunciation NYC’s Annual Stewardship & Mistletoe Galas by Chris Salboudis & Alexandra Liotopoulos

NYC, SATURDAY, DECEMBER 3rd, 2022: After a hiatus resulting from the pandemic, the immediate and extended community of Annunciation Greek Orthodox Church of New York gathered at the Harvard Club for the long-anticipated annual Stewardship and Mistletoe Young Professional Galas. This two-part black-tie event promotes fellowship within the Greek-American community while raising critical funds for the maintenance of the parish and its diverse ministries.

“We’re back!” is a sentiment resounding with every heartfelt outreach effort by Gala Chair Cassandra Romas, who led the efforts for the evening’s events with unprecedented success.

The event, which supports the iconic church located on the corner of 91st Street and West End, welcomed over 700 guests at the picaresque venue. Guests were filled with good cheer as they danced the night away to the Dean Vail Orchestra (<https://bounce-us.com/about-us>) in the main dining hall and DJ Bobby Karounos of Spartan Sounds (<https://spartansounds.com/index.html>) around the enormous signature Christmas tree.

In a show of unprecedented support, the Hellenic young professional community rallied to attend the Mistletoe Gala, including members of several auspicious organizations: *Hellenic American Chamber of Commerce, Hellenic Medical Society, HABA, National Hellenic Student Association of America, Philo4Thought, Maids of Athena (Bayside Chapter)*, etc.

George J. Kostas, President of Annunciation’s Parish Council, served as MC for the event, offering a warm welcome to the assembled *parea*. “**We’re back!**” he began, which met with a roaring round of applause, followed by his heartfelt expression of humble thanks to the assembly. Mr. Kostas ended his welcome with an invitation to the assembly to visit Annunciation and join in on the available activities the church continually offers. “I’d like you to take the journey to the corner of 91st street and visit us.... We have something for everybody.... The amazing thing about our parish that always brings me joy is that it’s open every day of the week, all year round. There’s *always* something going on, so I want you to come and see that... and hope it will enrich your life as much as it has enriched mine.”

It’s important to note that in 2020 the Gala Committee made a valiant attempt to bolster community morale by hosting virtual galas during the pandemic under the leadership of Rev. Fr. Chrysostomos Gilbert (currently Dean of the Archdiocesan Cathedral of the Holy Trinity and former presiding priest at Annunciation), with special performances by DJ. Bobby Karounos (Owner, Spartan Sounds), Vassilis Anastasiou (aka Singer/Director *So Tiri*), comedian Ellen Karis and John Livanos (Founder, Stray Dog Wild Gin). This year, when asked how it felt to be back at the gala, DJ Bobby shared, “It feels really amazing to be here celebrating... to see everybody’s smiling faces. We’re looking forward to celebrating from Annunciation tonight. I’m truly honored to be back.”

Now, in 2022, despite uncertain odds, the event sold out in record time, a fact that reflects the Hellenic community’s appreciation for this special annual celebration of faith and unity. When asked how it felt to be back, Mr. Kostas shared, “There was an electric aura in the room... people were excited and happy to be back and it was reflected in the spirit of true joy, comradery and celebration....The fact that it took three years to get back together again both made it a success in the attendance and in the actual celebration. It was fantastic. We’re looking forward to next year being bigger, better and much more well received. Both sides, the Mistletoe and Stewardship Galas, seamlessly moved together as the night evolved. It was the first time I can remember that, when the doors were opened, we had a rush of people come in to the Stewardship side... perhaps because the music started a bit earlier and everyone was *dying* to start dancing... they didn’t want to wait. It was a first.”

This much-anticipated event does not happen overnight! Mistletoe Gala 2022 community liaison, Dena Skeadas, shared with us that the committee begins outlining the event details in the Summer following with monthly and weekly meetings as the date approaches. “We reached and surpassed our goal!...We knew that we had to open the waitlist because people

would be flying in from all over the country to attend. Thanks to *The Harvard Club* for being so accommodating, so we could bring in more people.”

Paul Politis, Project Manager for the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America and a senior member of the Gala Committee since 2010, was equally pleased with the attendance and progress of the evening. “You know, years ago it used to be in October, but we switched it to Christmas to give it a more festive theme....The idea was to bring the new and older generations together; the attendance has grown over the years because people love this event and it’s supporting a great cause.”

Community was certainly the overarching theme of the evening according to Christos Stavropoulos, Annunciation’s beloved cantor, and wife Georgia. “Anytime we can bring the Greek Orthodox community together, especially during the Holiday season, it is a blessing and a joy.”

It was particularly moving to see that both Rev. Father Sotirios Michalatos (presiding over the Annunciation family since September 2021) and Rev. Father Gilbert (representing His Eminence Archbishop Elpidophoros this year) were in attendance among the parishioners who have grown to know and appreciate them both.

Greg Gounardes, Administrative Assistant for the Archdiocese, also shared his views on the remarkable turnout, “The vibe is very exciting, there is a lot of energy, especially as we’re coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic...bringing people together and seeing people face-to-face again is a very wholesome experience.”

“We’ve taken an in person hiatus from our Stewardship & Mistletoe Galas and it is so good to be back here at the Harvard Club,” says Father Michalatos, expressing his gratitude at being the presiding priest at Annunciation. “This gala has been a great fundraiser for our church community and could not be possible without the hard work of so many individuals who make up the fabric of our beloved church family....Tonight our church raises funds to keep our community sustainable, but it’s also a night to gather in fellowship with one another... a night to come together in true annunciation spirit with our beloved friends to celebrate all of God’s blessings.” Father extends special thanks to many members of the parish who were seminal in the collaborative preparations for the event and affiliated meetings, outreach and more. “I’m so grateful for everyone’s God-given talents and for putting them to use. But always at our helm, our tireless leader steering the ship, is our Chairwoman, Kassandra Romas.” Another resounding applause from the assembly for Mrs. Romas, who has been Chair for the past 18 years. Next, Father Michalatos recognizes the efforts of Nick and Julie Sakellariadis, the Harvard Alum who helped establish this mission and “have an ability to make everyone feel like they’re a part of their family, which is a beautiful, beautiful thing.” Finally, Father offers his thanks to Annunciation’s administrative team, the many families and the Parish Council members who work tirelessly year-round to ensure that every aspect of daily, weekly and seasonal activities all run smoothly, lending their time, wisdom and experience to all aspects of Annunciation’s ongoing missions and initiatives. “And now,” Father concludes, “you are all a part of our church family....”

Father Evagoras Constantinides, Protopresbyter of the Ecumenical Throne by His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, Director of Special Events, shared that “Annunciation has really taken the church dance to a whole new level. The gala is not just an event for a parish but has truly turned into THE social event of Greek America in New York. Tonight, I’ve seen friends not just from New York, but Kansas City, Chicago, Florida, and all over the country to be at this event! Congratulations to Annunciation! We wish Father Sotiri and his entire community many, many more years!”

Following the event, Father Michalatos remarked, “It was wonderful to be together to celebrate our 18th annual Stewardship & Mistletoe Galas. I was overjoyed to see our beloved community partake in this highly anticipated event and celebrate our faith in Christ.”

The 2023 Gala is set for Saturday, December 2nd. We look forward to seeing you all there!

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