



Saint Katherine's Ladies Philoptochos Society: A Brief History

by

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*“Friends of the Poor” : Rooted in the Past, Serving the Present,
Envisioning the Future*

For I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me drink; I was a stranger and you took me in; I was naked and you clothed me....Assuredly, I say to you, in as much as you did it to one of my least brethren, you did it to me.

Matthew 25: 35-41

The word *philoptochos* is a multilayered expression rich in historical origins, religious meaning and practices, and social commitments. Ideationally and philosophically, it is part of *philanthropia*, a benevolent regard for man, *anthropos*, that denotes an active concern and care not only for family and friends, but also for one's fellow human beings. In the ancient Greek world *philanthropia* was practiced by both, individual citizens and the city states. It was extended to the needy, to strangers, who were sheltered in hostels, *xenones*, to the aged, and to the sick. The latter were cared for in hospitals, many of them attached to various temples. The most famous one was adjacent to the sanctuary of Asclepios, the god of medicine, in Epidaurus. Hippocrates, the father of medicine, in his rules for the practice of the medical profession, admonished physicians to attend to the indigent without a fee because their primary duty was to render their service to the well-being of humankind.

Orthodox benevolence and compassion for the needy and the underprivileged continued the legacy of *philanthropia*, but gave it a deeper spiritual content and an all-embracing scope. While its practice and commitment in the ancient world depended on prominent individuals and political authorities with limited public participation and awareness, early Christianity made it the cornerstone of the spiritual life of its faithful. Serving the needs of others was a higher call based on Christ's example and teachings. "The Son of Man," he said to his disciples, "came not to be served but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom to many." (Matthew 20:28). The universal embrace of Christian *agape* was another concept and practice that differentiated it from ancient *philanthropia*. In Christianity, Saint Paul wrote, "there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Jesus Christ." (Galatians 3:28).

In this declaration of universality women are active participants in the new faith. Sharing an equal presence with men before Christ, they bear an equal responsibility and obligations toward their fellow humans. Thus, *philanthropia* became their entry to equality before God and man. From the early stages of Christianity women played an important role in the religious and social life of the Church. Along with nourishing their spiritual growth, this involvement broadened their awareness of the bigger world around them and energized them to contribute to its welfare. One group of women, who were instrumental in the charity work of the Byzantine Church, were the deaconesses, a religious order whose members attended to the poor and ministered to the sick. They channeled their services through the local churches, which supervised philanthropic institutions. One of them was a hospital in the monastery of Pantocrator in Constantinople founded in 1136 by the Empress Irene. It included a separate section for women and, more surprising, the presence of female doctors was not uncommon.

Women's contribution to the philanthropic work of the Byzantine Church was not limited to their active services to those who needed them, but it also extended to the pious generosity of the wealthier

among them. One of them, the deaconess Olympia, distributed her vast wealth to hospitals and *ptocheia*, institutions ministering to the poor. In doing this, she followed on the steps of her mentor, the celebrated Patriarch John Chrysostom, who had donated his personal possessions to the Church' charitable mission.

It is to the philanthropic legacy of Orthodox Christianity and the Byzantine Church, in which women figured prominently, that the origins of Philoptochos can be traced. Its mission statement echoes the same spirit that animated Christian *philanthropia* from its beginnings: "To aid the poor, the destitute, the hungry, the aged, the sick, ... the orphaned, the imprisoned, the widows....To promote the charitable, benevolent, and philanthropic purposes of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America through instructional programs, presentations, ...and other educational resources....To preserve and perpetuate Orthodox Christian concepts... and through them to promote the Greek Orthodox faith and traditions" By pursuing and fulfilling these aims, Philoptochos serves the needs of the present and paves the way to the future by drawing inspiration from the past.

Old Faith in the New World: The Founding of the Ladies Philoptochos Society in America

The origins of the Philoptochos Ladies Society in America can be traced back to the nineteenth century first in Greece. In 1855 Maria Ypsilandi founded the first Ladies Philoptochos Association in Athens whose aim was to establish an orphanage for girls. Another philanthropic organization, the Ladies Sisterhood in Christ, was formed in 1891 aiming to improve prison conditions and to establish prison hospitals. Philoptochos's more direct origins in America go back to 1894 when Father Paisios Ferentinos together with Amalia Feramoschos and Penelope Eleftheropoulos undertook the task of welcoming and assisting the waves of immigrants who arrived to New York City from the Greek world. The next stage was the establishment of the first Ladies Philoptochos in 1902 at the Holy Trinity Church in New York City. Later, the Society applied for a charter to the State of New York to be registered as a philanthropic association dedicated to charitable activities serving the poor.

A key date in the development of Philoptochos was the year 1922 when the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of North and South America was founded after receiving its incorporation from the State of New York. This event facilitated the granting of the Charter by the State of New York to the Holy Trinity Philoptochos Society of New York City. Its incorporation took place on July 23, 1928, when it was registered as a local philanthropic organization. Its charity work and services were recognized by Archbishop Athenagoras, who became its staunch advocate and supporter. In November 1931, during the General Archdiocesan Assembly in New York City, it was decided that a national organization should be formed with its specific By-Laws under the auspices of the Archdiocese, which would merge

the more than three hundred Philoptochos chapters already in existence. Then Archbishop Athenagoras set out to develop the legal framework for the new Society in consultation with the Central Council consisting of the executive committee of the Holy Trinity Philoptochos Society and the presidents of the New York Philoptochos chapters. This set the foundations of the national Federation of Greek Ladies Philoptochos Societies of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of North and South America.

In 1932 the Archbishop sent an encyclical to the Philoptochos chapters with a series of By-Laws and guidelines to be followed by the institution in accordance with the Constitution of the Archdiocese. This encyclical was a foundation stone for Philoptochos because it articulated the main services that would henceforth define its mission. Three years later, in October 1935, Philoptochos Society held its own convention in Boston with Archbishop Athenagoras presiding. Over the next twelve years of his tenure as Primate of the Orthodox Church of North and South America he sent many communications to the Society both praising their work and counseling them. In a message sent to its central office he proposed that its chapters “plan many events for the entire family, featuring music, lectures, performances, sponsoring bazaars and the St. Basil’s pita, charging a small admission fee....” A combination of bonding communal gatherings and fund raising, these events reflect the important role Philoptochos played during the early years of its establishment in the strengthening of the ethnic and religious ties of local communities.

One of Archbishop Athenagoras’s main interests was the education of the young. To this end, he urged the Philoptochos chapters to promote the establishment of Afternoon Greek language schools and Sunday schools in their communities. Children from poor families were at the forefront of his concerns. Philoptochos made his visions for them come true when in March 1944 it purchase a 250-acre estate in Garrison, New York on the Hudson River opposite the West Point Military Academy. It was designated as a Children’s Home and School. Initially this institution was placed under the supervision of the central Council of Philoptochos. St. Basil’s Academy, as it is known today, continued to function under the auspices of Philoptochos until 1951, when the then Archbishop transferred its administration to the Archdiocese.

Thus, within a few years of its foundation, Philoptochos’s mission encompassed a wide array of activities. When the Second World War erupted, it undertook yet another task going far beyond local communities. It enlisted the services of its chapters to contribute to the relief and assistance of the Greek people who were experiencing untold sufferings and privations under the Nazi Occupation.

By working with the Greek War Relief Association operating in America, they shipped to Greece an enormous amount of packages containing food, clothes, medicine, blankets and a host of other items.

By the time Archbishop Athenagoras left his See in New York in 1949 in order to occupy the highest office of the Orthodox Church when he was elected Ecumenical Patriarchate in Constantinople, the organization, over whose foundation he had presided and whose growth he had promoted and witnessed, had come of full age. In less than two decades of its existence since its establishment in 1931, many of its chapters had branched out from their local communities to the regional, national and even international stage. It was within this historical, religious, and cultural context that the beginnings and development of Columbia's Saint Katherine's Philoptochos Society took place within the embrace of the Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox community.

Columbia's Saint Katherine's Philoptochos Society: Beginnings and Growth over Time

Saint Katherine's Greek Women Society was incorporated by the State of South Carolina on January 19, 1938. Its first officers were Kalliope P. Verge, president; Stavroula N. Constan, vice-president; Angeline P. Xepapas, treasurer; and Emiline M. Constan, secretary. Marina N. Papadea, Pithia J. Siokos, and Constantina P. Papajohn served as trustees. The original membership numbered twenty-five ladies.

The growth and expansion of Saint Katherine's took place along the lines of the national Philoptochos as they have been delineated above. The ethnic element dominated its activities at first. Sarah Davis recalls that the meetings were conducted in Greek and then she would record the proceedings in English. Saint Katherine's celebration was a big event with everyone in the community participating. Vasilopita also was an important fund raising event with all the proceeds going to St. Basil's Academy. To further increase their fund raising resources, the ladies made pastries and baked goods individually and sold them to grocery stores and other outlets. These endeavors laid the foundation of today's Saint Katherine's Bake Sale, a well organized and promoted annual event known throughout Columbia. It is recognized for both, its professionalism and its wide philanthropic contributions.



Early on Saint Katherine's Society began to expand the scope of its activities beyond the community boundaries. Sarah mentioned that she "drove a bus once a week to take mental patients

from Craft Farrow Hospital” working as a volunteer at the hospital. She did this “in the name of Philoptochos.” The chapter’s charity outreach embracing the wider Columbia community extended even farther afield when its members joined the national organization in the collection of clothes and other items for the afflicted Greeks. Saint Katherine’s also expanded its presence in a regional and national direction. From its inception, the Society has fulfilled without failure its obligations to the diocese and the national Philoptochos. Its members have also been active in regional and national functions. In 1972 Sarah Davis was elected president of the diocese, an office that had been preceded by her election as a district board member. All diocese presidents were automatically members of the national board.

The growth of Saint Katherine’s Ladies Philoptochos over the eight decades of its existence, in the range of its philanthropic and cultural activities and in the degree and scope of its service and commitment to city-wide charities, parallels the growth of Columbia’s Greek Orthodox community of which Philoptochos is an integral part. The development of both institutions was guided by their abiding adherence to the Orthodox values of service to the community and of compassion and care for the less fortunate. Their development also demonstrates their will to adapt to the wider social milieu by embracing its promises and responding to its needs. Philoptochos fulfills its obligations to both the Holy Trinity and the surrounding community by means of philanthropy. It is as ancient as the roots of Orthodoxy and as enduring as mankind’s better instincts to assuage the pain of others in good spirit and with a cheerful heart. The realization of these goals is equally rewarding for its members. In pursuing the growth of their organization, they also grow personally by enjoying the benefits and the pleasures of fellowship and by learning from the skills, the experience, and the dedication of other members.

The prayer that opens the meetings of all Philoptochos chapters encapsulates its goals and mission.

O Lord Jesus Christ we bow our heads before You....Make us instruments of your peace and of Your hope, O Lord. Where there is pain and suffering, may we bring Your healing and comfort. Where there is loneliness and isolation, may we bring the fellowship of Your Holy Church. Where there is despair and discouragement, may we inspire hope and faith in You. Where there is hatred and strife, may we be peacemakers producing the fruits of reconciliation.

The generations of Saint Katherine's Philoptochos Society have answered these calls by giving tirelessly and selflessly of their time and talents to the service of those in need, to the promotion of the communal and civic engagements, and, ultimately, to the pursuit of spiritual enrichment. It is to all these women, to those who are present and to those who live in our memory, as well as to those who will continue their mission, and to the Holy Trinity community that has supported their task that this tribute is dedicated.

References

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