

Peace on the Ground

First Christian Orthodox Service after 57 years in the Church of Ayios Georgios Exorinos, within the Walled City of Famagusta



As a result of initiatives undertaken by civil society members from both communities, on 8 December 2013 a Christian Orthodox Sunday Service was performed at the Church of Ayios Georgios Exorinos, which lies within the Walled City of Famagusta. This was the first religious service there since 1957 when the intercommunal troubles first started. Some truly inspiring personal stories behind and around this historic moment are chronicled here exclusively for the Friends of Cyprus 2014 report.

The carpenter's grandson

When the Green Line checkpoints opened in 2003, the church of St George Exorinos was functioning as a Cultural Centre. A toilet was installed in the sanctum. Greek Cypriots visiting the church were appalled. Many people tried to get rid of the toilet but the Anglican priest who used the church for a period on Sundays for his small congregation, refused to allow the removal unless another could be installed near the premises. Eventually, the grandson of Kiamil Reis - the Turkish Cypriot carpenter who did the original woodwork of the church, see box – stepped forward and built at his own expense a toilet at the edge of the garden of the church.



In 2010, Ümit Inatçı (above), head of the Arts Department at the Eastern Mediterranean University and responsible for the Cultural Centre which was housed in St George Exorinos, felt that the building should be turned back into a church. Eventually he persuaded the University to stop using the space and dismantled the theatre stage that was installed there. Slowly-slowly, he cleaned the woodwork, the chandeliers, the walls and the altar. All the electrical wiring was done from scratch. When he finished, Ümit approached his friends Serdar Atai and Okan Dağlı

- members of the 'Famagusta Initiative' NGO - and told them that the church was ready to be used by the Christians.

Serdar, Okan and Pavlos



Pavlos and Serdar

Serdar and Okan then called their friend Pavlos Iacovou, a Famagustian who was 20 years old in 1974. On 16 November, Pavlos Iacovou and Serdar Atai visited the Church. Pavlos' heartbeat changed at that moment, as he recalls it. More meetings, with the Church, with the United Nations. All the pieces started falling into place.

Civic Society In Action

Things really started to heat up. The Famagusta Municipality, the Famagusta Chamber of Commerce and Industry, the Constantia Bishopric but above all the ordinary citizens spread the word, through television, radio, newspapers, word of mouth, and of course nowadays, through Facebook and Twitter. Hundreds responded. Buses, eleven in total, were organised from all towns.

On Friday 6 December, with just two days to go, sentimental priests from the Constantia Bishopric inspected the Church. Everything was ready for Sunday's service – the first after a long pause of 57 years...

The Big Day Arrives

Sunday, 8 December, started early for the Greek Cypriot event coordinator Pavlos Iacovou. Pavlos set off from his home in Paralimni at 7 am and was soon at the Ayios Nikolaos checkpoint, in a UN-accompanied convoy which transported priests and holy icons to the Church. The checkpoint was smoothly negotiated and within minutes after crossing, the convoy arrived at St George Exorinos to set up. Soon the buses and the cars carrying the Greek Cypriots started arriving.

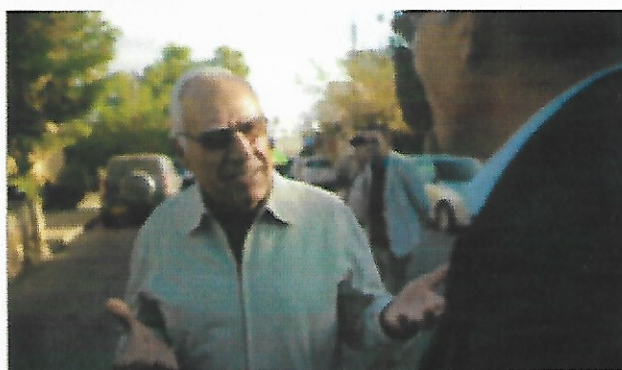
Mustafa and Pavlos



Pavlos and Mustafa

Standing outside the church among many welcoming Turkish Cypriots was Mustafa Dağlı, 80, who comes from Leonarisso in Karpasia. Mustafa moved to Famagusta in 1955 - just one year before the first modern-era division of the City. An ex customs worker in old times, he is the retired owner of an insurance brokerage now managed by his children.

Event coordinator Pavlos Iacovou, 58, is from Varosha but now lives nearby in Paralimni. His family owns the Florida Hotel in the fenced-off city. Nowadays he visits Famagusta as often as he can with his two beloved grandchildren and he has made many Turkish Cypriot friends. He is about to make a new friend in Mustafa: Mustafa: "We are in our town." Pavlos: "Do you remember my father?" -Who was he? -He owned the Florida Hotel on the beach. -Ah yes, I remember, but so many years have passed. Yes I remember, I knew your father. Many years have passed, but okay. When it is the season for swimming we go there with my friends, near your hotel. We see the ghost city, but what can we do.



Pavlos: "It is only up to us and nobody else." -M: Eh ok, but we aren't doing it. -P: We will do it. This is just the beginning. Mustafa: "I hope so, I hope that this is

the beginning and that it continues and that the next things will happen that must happen so that a solution is found to the Cyprus problem. I was 25 years old when it started, now I reached 80 and the Cyprus problem is still going on. How many years...". P:-Two hundred years.

Mustafa: Why are they taking so long?

Mustafa: "We will die before we get to see the solution. We made this beginning today to come closer. The people to come closer. A solution must be found. Why are they taking so long? Everything is on the table. You get what you will get, I get what I will get, and end of story."

Maria, Sotiris and Spyros

At this point, an elderly lady joins the conversation. "Who is speaking Greek", she asks. "I do", Mustafa responds. "What can I do for you?"

Maria: "Do you remember when we were here". -Of course I remember. -I remember you, do you



Maria Papaavraam, the priest's daughter

remember me? You used to live here inside the Walled City. -There is our house right there... -She is Maria, the daughter of the priest!

Brothers Sotiris and Spyros arrive and join the conversation. Mustafa: "This is the son of Panayis the Kantartzis" - see that I recognised you Maria? interrupts Sotiris. Do you remember my father? He had the grocery store here.

Maria, the priest's daughter is eager to go inside her late father's Church and says that she was pleased to see everyone again, but lingers as Mustafa addresses her.



Maria holds up a picture of her father, Papa - Avraamis, the last priest of the Church.

"...In 1902 Michael Louizides acquired the Nestorian church with the help of the British Commissioner and it henceforth became known as Ayios Georgios Exorinos.

Michael's friend, the well known Turkish carpenter Kiamil Reis, donated all the timber and made all the furniture for the interior of the church: "I cannot accept money from a friend, and certainly not from God".

It was Easter, around 1925, when the mayor of Varoshia decided to celebrate Holy Friday in the Greek tradition, which would require all Holy Icons to meet in the main square of Varoshia. Many Greeks tried to stop papa-Maneas – the priest of St. George Exorinos – from joining in, being afraid that the Turks of Famagusta would object, but papa-Maneas was adamant. Like an apparition from the Byzantine past, lights appeared from afar coming down towards the main square where the Turks were. Behind the tall figure of papa-Maneas came the heavily adorned Epitaph Icon, followed by the reverent congregation chanting melodiously. The atmosphere was electrified; the procession stopped in the main square surrounded by Turks. Then, out of the silence rose the sweet voice of the priest. He was praying in Turkish for the well being of the Turkish community, for the mufti and for peace and prosperity for all inhabitants of Famagusta. One by one, the Turks stood up, removed their turbans and fez, lowered their heads, while all around, the balconies filled with women and children..."

"Well I was just showing to someone else the home of the priest who was here in 1956. Father Avraamis. We saw them around but we didn't talk much. My home used to be in Famagusta near the city walls. There was the home of Loukis Kokkinos ("the red"), he was my neighbour and a trustee of the Church. His house was near our house." Sotiris chimes in "we were baptised in here". Mustafa continues "We used to be half Christians and half Turks in here". Sotiris completes his neighbour's sentence: "...but we left in 1956 in a hurry."

Maro, Nicos and Mertkan

Another lady joins the circle and addresses Mustafa, Sotiris and Spyros.



Maro, Sotiris and Spyros

"I am Maro", she says, "the daughter of Patroklos". Maro is 65, dressed in black for Sunday service, with her tinted sunglasses shielding her frail eyes from the early morning glare. "There is my house, that yellow house right there. We left in 1956. I remember an elderly Turkish Cypriot man coming every day from the hospice, he had Parkinson's and my mother would brew him a Cyprus coffee and he would drink it from a straw. My mother felt sorry for him and looked after him". -Have you seen my brothers? Nico, come and meet Mustafa. -Yes I remember you. -The house I was born in is right here, says Nicos. My doctor was

a Turkish Cypriot, Niazi Manera and I was baptised in this Church.

Maro and Nicos then start walking toward their ancestral home. Mertkan volunteers to accompany them and to knock the door on their behalf. Mertkan recounts the events that followed:

Mertkan Hamit, 26, Turkish Cypriot academic and native of Famagusta: Today, I had a friend with me who is from Turkey and who visited Cyprus for the first time. Maro approached us and asked if we could accompany her to her previous house which was right opposite of the church.

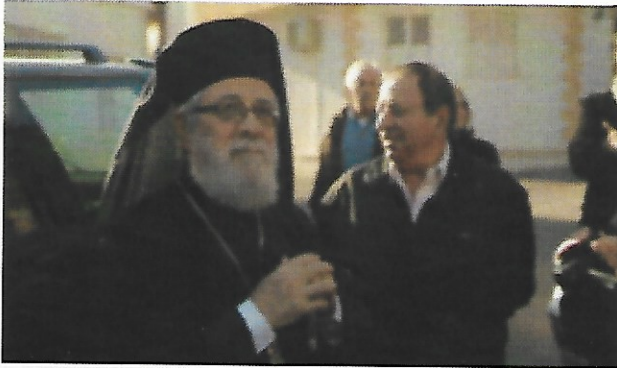


Maro and Nicos point out their home

She asked if it would be possible to see her house. We walked there but unfortunately it was obvious that no one had lived there for some time. It was a very sentimental moment for Maro. She lived there until she was 8 years old. I told her that I am sorry and she replied that this was not my fault. After a while, my friend from Turkey, who was devastated by what he saw and by the emotional impact of the day, responded in a very emotional way saying that 'Look what was done to those innocent ones.' After a second of silence he continued: 'I think yes, a common Cyprus for the people of this country is a necessity. This is the only way to reduce the pain and the suffering of these people'.

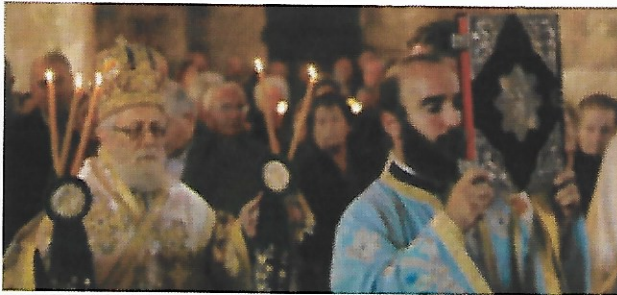
The service commences

Hasan Ince, a Turkish Cypriot businessman and Famagusta native, recounts a poignant moment that transpired outside the Church just as the service inside was getting started: he saw many Turkish Cypriots over 70 years old, originally from the Old City of Famagusta, standing at the gates and expectantly looking at the crowds pouring in and hoping to meet again with their old friends.



Metropolitan Vasilios arrives at Ayios Georgios Exorinos

As the Metropolitan Bishop of Constantia, Vasilios, arrived to preside over the proceedings, one of the old men said: "I could not manage to see any of them, maybe they passed away and that's why I couldn't see any of my friends".



Metropolitan Vasilios leads the proceedings



Mrs Alexandra Galanou with Mayor Alexis Galanos observe the Holy Communion service

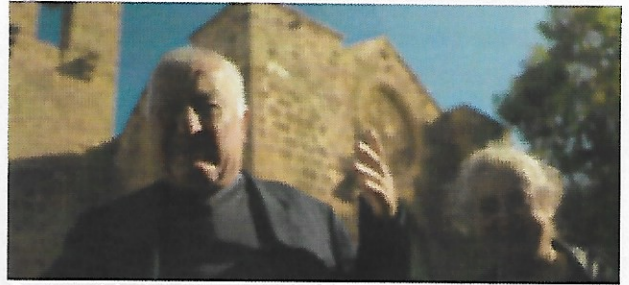
After the service, Costas feels young again

Costas Tsolakis, 80: "The last time this Church was open was in 1956. We hope this continues every Sunday so that the Orthodox Christians can come. Back in those days before the split, we from Paralimni used to supply the walled city with produce delivered by donkeys. I used to do that job, bringing produce from the fields on the donkey. Our mayor Pouyiouros made a municipal market so we could sell our produce."

"I feel wonderful about this. I am sure we will continue with good spirits to find a solution as soon as possible."

"Those who took this initiative, as Bishop Vasilios said, deserve congratulations - all those people who worked so that we could be here today all together."

"We thank them again. Today I feel young again. I feel something pleasant. I feel something different, something



Costas: 'I feel that I am flying'.

like a wind - I feel that I am flying. This is our reality now. It must continue."

Metropolitan Vasilios, Mayors Oktay and Alexis

In an eerie echo of the awe-inspiring events of Easter 1925 (see box), the Turkish Cypriot citizens of Famagusta, via the Eastern Mediterranean University who are the current custodians of the building, have graciously invited the Constantia Bishopric to perform religious services at the Church whenever they wish from this point onward.

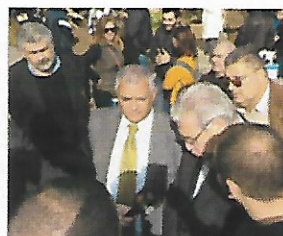


In the photo (from the left):

Her Excellency Oksana Tomová, the Ambassador of the Slovak Republic to Cyprus Yiota Afrentiou (Behind the Slovak Ambassador) Mrs. Rita Severis from Costas & Rita Severis Foundation Famagusta Metropolitan Vasilios Mr. Serdar Atai from Famagusta Initiative Co. of the Slovak Ambassador

Graciously accepting the offer, at the end of Sunday's service, Metropolitan Bishop Vasilios expressed the wish to permanently house icons in the reborn Church of St. George Exorinos, as soon as appropriate security arrangements are in place.

Capping the proceedings of a momentous day for peace and reconciliation, the Turkish Cypriot Mayor Oktay Kayalp and the Greek Cypriot Mayor Alexis Galanos spoke to the cameras outside the Church to thank the members of civil society - Turkish Cypriots and Greek Cypriots alike - for making history, and to make clear their intent to work closely together "For Famagusta".



Mayors Oktay Kayalp and Alexis Galanos speak together to the media