

El Camino Real District 20
District Conference
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**“Greek Letters Day:
The Beacon of Light of the Greek Miracle.”**

By Dr. James F. Dimitriou

It is an honor & privilege for me to be here this afternoon.

Indeed, we all are all truly honored to be here this day to participate in this Conference and deliberate on the proceedings of the Order of Ahepa.

It is a particular privilege to be here today at our conference at a time when we honor **Greek Letters Day**, the celebration of Greek Learning and the commemoration of the Three Hierarchs of the Greek Orthodox Church.

In celebrating '**Greek Letters**' we express our eternal gratitude to the **Three Hierarchs** who elevated the study of our Hellenic letters, culture and language. This day serves as a reminder of the continuity of our Greek culture throughout the centuries as well as a celebration of our Greek community. For it is the community where both our devotion to Orthodoxy and our Hellenic heritage are intertwined to give us our unique sense of identity and our profound continuity we have with our heritage. For us all, when we gather we are celebrating the eternal Greek Miracle.

Coming so soon after the restoration of the relics **of St. John Chrysostom and St. Gregory the Theologian** to the Great Church in Constantinople, this year's commemoration has a more profound importance.

The relics of these two Great Saints and Patriarchs of Constantinople were stolen when the 4th Crusade sacked, plundered and devastated

Byzantium in 1204. The relics were taken by the Crusaders, while diverted from their campaign for control of the Holy Land. These relics were taken along with countless other treasures, holy relics of the Saints, the True Cross, the Veil of Panagia, and the famous Bronze Horses that are now in St. Marks Cathedral in Venice. The Great Church of St. Sophia was central to the Crusaders attack. It was here that they killed, raped and destroyed all that opposed them. Carrying these treasures back to Rome, Venice and various Churches of the Latin West.

Last November, Pope John Paul II returned the relics of the two Great Hierarchs to the Ecumenical Patriarch, Bartholomeos I following an apology the Pontiff reiterated for the heinous acts of the 4th Crusade. Back in Constantinople, the relics were received in a special hierarchical service commemorating their position as Ecumenical Patriarchs.

Somehow this jester helps us renew our dedication to perpetuate the **Greek Letters** as a special tribute to all those that sacrificed so much.

Indeed, the commemoration of Greek Letters this year takes on an even more special meaning coming so soon after the **Summer of the Modern Greek Miracle**. A time when little Greece did prove worthy of their ancestors and put on, perhaps, the best modern Olympiad. This last summer, the Olympics took on a very special role to extend the true meaning of the Olympics, as evidenced in the Torch Relay across 5 continents under the memorable pledge, "**Pass the Flame, Unite the World.**" Thus pledging to leave politics, conflicts, turmoil and despair aside for a noble ideal. The motto itself, could be the very theme of our proceedings here.

Indeed, the ancient Olympic Games provided the world with history's longest reigning peace treaty, lasting over 1000 years and proclaiming peace and safe passage. Truly, the Olympic Games provided the ancient world a beacon of light with a higher sense of goodwill, peace and humanitarian

ideals. The common perception of the Olympics is reflected strongly in the words of the 5th century, lyric poet, Pindar:

"As in the daytime there is no star in the sky warmer and brighter than the sun, likewise there is no competition greater than the Olympic Games."

In accordance with the ancient tradition of "Ekecheiria" during the Olympic Games, on the 3rd of November 2003, the United Nations General Assembly unanimously adopted the Olympic Truce resolution submitted by Greece. Entitled, **"Building a Peaceful and Better World Through Sport and the Olympic Ideals,"** the resolution calls upon both the United Nations as well as the International Olympic Committee to make a joint pledge in calling for a

"Truce during the Games that would encourage a peaceful environment and ensuring the safe passage and participation of athletes and others at the Games, and thereby, mobilizing the youth of the world to the cause of peace . . ."

Underlining the importance of this historic resolution, **UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan,** stated:

"I think it sends a powerful message, telling the warring parties to stop and reflect, give a chance to peace. . . I hope that people in all conflict areas from Iraq to Afghanistan to Liberia to the Congo will really listen to the message. But it is not just those who are actually fighting. The populations should also work to make demands that they want peace and that the fighting must stop."

The ancient Olympic Games give us insight into the ideals of ancient Hellas. As we gather together in common purpose in an effort to find guidance let us recall the Spirit of Hellenism, both the Modern Miracle of the Games as well as the best of the Golden Age.

Let us further recall all the Beacons of Light from across the globe that have transformed the world from the darkness of barbarism into a world of light. Let us come together to recapture the essence of world's great civilizations that have served to elevate humankind and human needs and transported those ideals as new Beacons of Light throughout the centuries, across the seas and to new lands. Let us now pass the Torch to a new generation of Hellenes.

Ancient Hellas gave us the Golden Age; Modern Hellas gave us a Golden Summer! The birthplace of democracy spread a spirit of peace of commitment and of history for all the world to share. The Olympic Spirit gave us a mosaic of inclusion of all peoples, ethnic groups and minorities. The Olympic Beacon of Light is one based on principle, on vision and on a new sense of peace and freedom of all peoples. The post-modern nation is one that thrives as the Olympic Torch burns, passed from hand to hand, from individual to individual, from region to region, from continent to continent, as we **“pass the flame, and unite the world,”** toward a universal cultural contract based on the simplest and most treasured of all words, freedom! Again, the Olympic Torch becomes a symbolic Beacon of light, of civilization and of vision and commitment. The ancients gave us beacons of civilization for us to treasure and advance.

One of the strongest Beacons of Light given to all humankind, was the most sacred of all words in any language, **“eleftheria”**! The ancient Hellenic ideal of Freedom has many dimensions, is spoken in many languages and has many followers. The peculiar genius of the Hellenes is to give the world the concept of “civic” freedom for citizens to participate in public life and political institutions. “Philosophical” freedom serves as a direction of rational human thought and discourse. Freedom of expression as well as freedoms from fear, want and hunger all comes from ancient Hellas. In his ***Politics***, Aristotle writes that the state itself is defined as a “community of freemen.” For **Aristotle**, freedom and democracy are joined as “The end (goal) of democracy is freedom. . . . Aristotle tells us that,

“Democracy . . . arises out of the notion that those who are equal in any respect are equal in all respects; because men are equally free, they claim to be absolutely equal.”

This bright Beacon of light has illuminated the great civilizations of the past while lighting the path for our children to follow. Our heritage is rich with accomplishment and great achievements. We know their names, their contributions to history, but we are eternally grateful for the existence across alien centuries, oceans and continents. What is the essence of civilization that has traveled through time? Freedom itself serves as the Bright Light of Morning in the realm of Western Civilization.

But it is the very Essence that is under siege, perhaps like no other time in history. And it is to that essence that we are here to commemorate, to defend, to protect and to perpetuate.

In these days of **tension, terrorism and war** we gather together to seek a renewal of our spirit. We seek a refuge from the world's turmoil and strife. These days together give us solace to renew and regenerate our strength. We seek our "**Beacon of Light.**"

With the world suffering from threats of terrorism and war, the legacy of the Beacons of Light of all history seems more preciousness given the real possibility of its extinction.

Today, there is no nation of the world, Western or not, that does not desire the advantages freedom. Those powerful ideals of the human spirit of individualism democracy, humanism and freedom, that all free men seek are the very The "Beacon of Light" given to us through the Hellenes. When Chinese dissidents in May 1989 demonstrated in Beijing's Tiananmen Square demanding civic freedom to participate in government, the students constructed a universal symbol for freedom, the goddess of democracy. This symbol does not come from their own ethnic or national traditions, but one of universal appeal.

The spirit of consensual government and freedom was evident in the fall of the Berlin Wall, Russian Peristroyka, and even the Charter of the United Nations, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The spirit of the freedom, the Mythic spirit of life, the modern spirit itself serves all of these nations as they enter post modern state development. That Beacon of Light was uniquely:

Discovered by the Hellenes.

Taken by the Romans.

Cherished by Byzantium.

Spread throughout Mediterranean cultures.

Rediscovered by the Renaissance.

Transmitted by the Enlightenment.

and Proclaimed by the United Nations Charter and all freedom loving peoples of the world.

Today we must not apologize to those that are mean spirited, revisionist and quasi historians for distorting the legacy of this Beacon of Light and the very beacons of civilization itself! It comes a time for us to proclaim it! Resurrect its strength and challenge those distorting history for political correctness.

The very essence of humanism and tolerance comes to us from the mythic vision of life itself. Indeed, would we have a civilization without the concepts of Freedom, Democracy, Humanism, Justice, Philosophy, Majority Rule, Rights of Mankind?

When Pulitzer Prize winning author, **Will Durant** described what he was trying to accomplish in his "The Story of Civilization," he said that he too was looking for his own fortress of the spirit, or as he put it,

"a keyhole through which we can spy . . . a celestial city, a special Country of the Mind, wherein a thousand saints, statesmen, inventors, scientists, poets, artists, musicians, lovers, and philosophers still live and speak, teach and carve and sing."

That very "**country of the mind**" unites many with common heritage and tradition. It provides a glimpse of the Beacon. But now we must proceed to define our new road toward a rediscovery of American Hellenism. We should dedicate a new Spirit of Greek Letters carved from the Beacon of the past, yet one that has the spirit of the **Golden Olympiad** itself. Thus an all-inclusive model to continue to pass on the Greek Letters.

Today we are reminded of **Pericles** himself that asked his fellow Athenians to prove worthy of their heritage, and we must ask the question to ourselves and of our children throughout the years, to broaden the beacon of light, transform it and yet learn from it. Will the strong give way to a new generation, to the young, the courageous, the determined? Will the global institutions, nations and economic powers lead us to a world that works, abolishes crimes against humanity, builds bridges rather than bank accounts and multinational corporate profits?

Is this honor to be that of a **Prometheus**, the god of forethought? He was given the task of creating mankind by Zeus. He felt great compassion for his creations and stole fire from heaven and cheated the gods in the apportionment of the sacrifice to aid them. After stealing the fire from the gods, will a new Beacon of Light achieve its vision for mankind? What will that vision be? Will the gods even allow it?

That **Mythic Vision Life** that the Miracle of Greece has given mankind. The Common vision to Clarify the Universals in the Daily Chaos of Life. It is the Timeless Essences of Life, It is precisely the Values of Hellenic Heritage that transcend the centuries that we celebrate tonight.

It was **Plato** himself that taught us to seek out the Ideal. To formulate our fortress for all eternity to see!

To engage in a **Quest** to discover the absolute moral and esthetic values and to simplify them into concrete terms--to what is **Good, Beautiful and Just.**

It is these values together with the high moral value we place on Family, Faith, Humanism, Peace, Justice, Cooperation and Heritage that we celebrate in the timelessness of the Human Spirit and the spirit of the Olympic Torch as it crosses many lands.

The metamorphoses of classical Hellenic concepts of Freedom and democracy and the Olympiad itself, were all monumental achievements of the greatest magnitude of all.

And now, when we gather together in deliberations, it is at once a homecoming--much like a return to Greece, or like the deep ache of **Odysseus for Ithaca**. Or In the words of T.S. Elliot,

**"to arrive where we started and to
know the place for the first time."**

In an age of uncertainty when others lament over the loss of values and direction. Let us take refuge into our "**Beacon of Light**." Let us take pride in our spirit, our faith, our culture and our Heritage. We must look to the future for strength in order to advance in the light of the past.

It was the commitment to the preservation of the spirit of Hellenism and the ideal of democracy that brought the Enlightenment to the world and for future generations that carried the Light to new lands.

Our immigrant fathers and grandfathers put public service and American citizenship first in their minds, as America was their adopted home. My grandfather was one such immigrant. He and my father were the Beacons of Light that carried their Hellenic Heritage in their hearts and souls and sharing it with their children. My grandfather left Constantinople, seeking refuge from the Ottoman Empire; he arrived in Los Angeles over 100 years ago. In America, he opened the First Greek Coffee House, **The Acropolis Café**, to cater to the new immigrant, help find jobs and homes for the young boys who were coming to Los Angeles.

In that age, new immigrants arrived to a strange, New World. Strange language, customs, work habits and attitudes were pervasive. The inhumanity of the industrial age called upon ever increasing waves of immigrants to be lost in heartless factories.

The new immigrant needed help in the alien sounding language and customs to become American Citizens. They also needed, however,

the comfort of their compatriots and the aid of common spirit to build new homes, while preserving their golden heritage.

The immigrants continued their spirit and commitment. That spirit, was itself a Beacon of Light, traveling across oceans, was seen as the foundation where a diverse Heritage could be promoted for future generations of Americans.

The early American immigrant needed aid, comfort, direction and unity. They needed an organization to preserve, protect and perpetuate their cultural heritage in a brave new world. The AHEPA would be such an organization.

A future that would have the vision to see the end of the **Melting Pot** of the heartless, thoughtless industrial age that would eventually usher in a new, humanitarian and multicultural nation. But the industrial age and nation building were the pervasive goals of the times. Immigrants worked the factories, railroads, mines and mills to the beat of industry. A young nation was being created, crafted and carried across a continent. The Melting Pot would predominate and forge a new American. “**E pluribus Unum,**” out of many, one, was the call of nation building. But the new immigrant needed more. They needed aid, direction and most of all, a touch of their Hellenic Heritage. Each new wave of immigrants was treated more harshly. Those from Mediterranean cultures were not regarded as from the same “stock” as earlier immigrants. Immigrants were denied the inclusion into the “sidewalks of gold” that they came to capture. Guided only by their spirit, their personal fortress, the immigrant withstood the test of the forging nationalism. On railroad gangs, mining crews, factory assembly lines, the new immigrant voices were silent, but their vision and spirit remained, like the legendary “Greek Fire” of Byzantium, that would stay lit, even when underwater, reemerging at a time to ignite the flame once again.

The **AHEPA** represents the largest Hellenic American cultural organization in the world. The AHEPA provided the Beacon of Light to the hundreds of thousands of Greek Immigrants that arrived in America. The AHEPA was a means for preserve the Hellenic culture within the context of the American Dream.

For nearly 9 decades, Ahepa has fostered a proud history of programs that promote Hellenic Heritage, education, and charitable and humanitarian goals.

The legacy of Ahepa accomplishments is long. In the early years, the AHEPA offered the Greek immigrant aid, protection and comfort. The AHEPA fought discrimination on a broad scale. Early Greek immigrant businesses, Churches, homes needed an organization defend them in the Melting Pot of America. The AHEPA set off a noble goal of education to create new citizens, productive learners and members of their adopted country. The AHEPA saw the wisdom of promoting Hellenic Culture, but along with American citizenship.

As the immigrants matured, grew and prospered a new threat to Hellenic culture emerged. The loss of heritage among the young. The AHEPA transformed its early goal of making Americans out of Greeks, into preserving the Greek heritage for the children of the immigrants. Education remains the highest goal of AHEPA. Today, AHEPA continues to donate to education, giving scholarships, grants, cultural and dramatic presentations and aiding programs in Modern Greek studies. Again, the emphasis is on preservation of culture today.

The AHEPA provided the immigrant Greek respect, accomplishment and fulfillment. Numerous programs were undertaken to promote the interests of the Greek American community. A leader in finding a cure for Thallasimia, in a national bone marrow registry program, programs to promote the study of Greek culture and language in schools. Further, as the AHEPA memberships ages, a new program building senior citizen housing programs in a number of major American cities. Providing the elderly with safe, comfortable housing on a broad scale.

Another Beacon of Light is in the area of charitable goals. The AHEPA continues to foster aid and donations for many worthwhile projects. Greek War Relief collected funds to aid Greece in the Second World War. A system of 12 clinics was built all over Greece. Later, Hospital's in Athens and Slaking, Earthquake, hurricane and disaster relief also color the AHEPA's rich contribution

In the attempt to preserve our religious faith within the diversity of America, the AHEPA provide yet another Beacon of Hope and Faith to the early church in America. From the beginning of AHEPA in Atlanta, Georgia, AHEPA has come to the aid of our Holy Orthodox Church. We must not forget that In the early days of immigration, the AHEPA was vigilant in protecting our immigrants and our churches from the Ku Klux Klan, No Nothing Parties and other agents of doom. Eventually, the AHEPA served the new immigrant well, kept the spirit alive to help organize communities and build over 300 churches and 1000 chapters throughout the United States and Canada.

AHEPA's record is a recognized one raising a million of dollars on behalf of St. Basil's Academy and Hellenic College. Further, the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island National Museum received sizable AHEPA donations and support. In the service of their adopted nation, the AHEPA would go on record in contributing to the very fabric of the American nation.

Yet, the Brightest Beacon of all is in the support of our youth and the future of Hellenism in America. Here, the AHEPA continues to foster a proud history and support in programs, education and community support.

The AHEPA serves as an instrument of Hellenic Culture in America. The Torch has been carried through three and fourth generation Hellenes. As my grandfather carried the Torch to America in the beginning of the last century, it is my children that will carry it proudly into the 21st Century. Its role as a Beacon of Light has served to maintain our culture and traditions in what would have been an alien environment.

The strength of the Torch is evident in the address of Professor Kimon Doukas, Past Supreme President of the AHEPA given to the 44th Supreme Convention in:

Our Hellenic background, steeped in the Christian teachings of our Holy and Venerable Church of Orthodoxy, has given us the courage

and strength to understand and to absorb our American environment in a perfect union, which:

Promotes loyalty to the USA
Revives the Glory of eternal Hellas
Respects inalienable rights of mankind
Strives for the betterment of Society
Abhors political corruption
Defends and protects oppressed people
Labors for the perfection of Morality
Champions the cause of Education
Loves God and Man and
Hopes for a measure of Happiness.

Today, Ahepa continues to promote our Hellenic heritage into the 21st Century.

The Torch is being passed to a new generation of Hellene. A generation that is to keep the spirit alive, the flame burning and the strength of will to carry the Torch. No longer do we have the heartless factories and mines, but today we have the growing commercialism, mass communications and all pervasive pop culture to help stray our youth from continuing their mission.

The guiding lamp of the Beacon of civilization can once again serve as the Beacon for the 21st Century. For our future generations to have that wonderful “**spirit**” that transcends time and oceans let us remember the importance of the Journey itself. Like Odysseus, let us commit our spirit, our love and our determination to carry the Journey on through future generations. In our hearts, let us remember the importance of Greek Letters and the work of the Three Hierarchs. Let us take special note of the eternal words of C.P. **Cavafy** when writing his memorable “**Poseidonians:**” as he told the fate of the Greeks living in Magna Gracea, so long separated from Hellas and their lament for their distant heritage. For they were a people slowly witnessing the loss of their light and spirit!

**"The Poseidonians forgot the Greek language
after so many centuries of mingling
with Tyrrhenians, Latins, and other foreigners.
The only thing surviving from their ancestors
was a Greek festival, with beautiful rites,
with lyres and flutes, contests and wreaths.
And it was their habit toward the festival's end
to tell each other about their ancient customs
and once again to speak Greek names
that only few of them still recognized.
And so their festival always had a melancholy ending
because they remembered that they too were Greeks,
they too once upon a time were citizens of Magna
Graecia; and how low they'd fallen now, what they'd
become,
living and speaking like barbarians,
cut off so disastrously from the Greek way of life.**

" C. Cavafy translated by E. Keeley and P. Sherrard

Let us dedicate the AHEPA as a new Beacon of Light with new purpose and renewed of spirit. Let us call for the restoration of our heritage. Let us make a commitment to further the dream of both the spirit of Greek Letters and the Golden Olympic Summer and work for Hellenism in the following 10 areas:

1. The restoration of the Parthenon Marbles to Mother Hellas.
2. The removal of the contrived use of the name Macedonia by the Skopje government;
3. The reopening of the Theological School of Halki and the restoration of religious and human rights in Turkey;
4. The dismantling of the 45,000 man Turkish army of occupation in Cyprus and the daily violation of Hellenic Air Space in the Eastern Aegean.
5. The restoration of the proper study of Western Civilization in our schools.
6. The expansion of Greek Language & Heritage Programs for our youth including the creation and support for a permanent Journey to Greece.
7. The expansion of our scholarship and educational programs.
8. The promotion and sponsorship of Chairs of Modern Greek Studies.
9. A renewed commitment to National Projects promoting Hellenism.
10. Expansion of our Senior Housing Programs.