

News Release

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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CHARLOTTE HOSTS THE 33RD NATIONAL ORATORICAL FESTIVAL

The 2016 Archdiocese Oratorical Festival was held in the Metropolis of Atlanta and was hosted by the Parish of St. Nektarios in Charlotte, NC. Planning for the weekend's festivities began last August and the many months of preparations involved a host of parishioners who were eager to help wherever needed. Spearheading the host committee was Frank Bilotto, assisted by Evelyn Kund, Elaine Miller and Andronikii Kleto.

In the Junior Division, the top speakers were:

First Place was awarded to Eirene Stavropoulos from St. John the Baptist Church, Des Plains, IL in the Metropolis of Chicago. She will receive a \$2000 college scholarship from the Department of Religious Education. Elisabeth Stamatogiannakis from the Church of St. John the Divine, Jacksonville, FL in the Metropolis of Atlanta received second place. She will receive a \$1500 college scholarship. Third Place and a \$1000 college scholarship went to Peter Tsatalis from the Annunciation Church, Dayton, OH in the Metropolis of Detroit.

In the Senior Division, First Place and a \$2000 college scholarship was awarded to Christina Hanos from the Sts. Constantine & Helen Church, West Nyack, NY in the Direct Archdiocesan District. Second Place and a \$1500 college scholarship was awarded to Demitra Tomasides, Holy Trinity Church, Dallas, TX in the Metropolis of Denver. Third Place and a \$1000 college scholarship was awarded to Victoria Dionisos from the St. George Church, Media, PA in the Metropolis of New Jersey.

The eighteen finalists and their families experienced the warm hospitality of the parishioners of St. Nektarios church. On Friday evening the participants were able to participate in chanting the Encomia Service to St. Nektarios, held in the presence of his sacred and miraculous relics on the Solea. After a welcome by Fr. John Wallace, assistant priest at St. Nektarios, everyone was escorted to the community center and treated to a delicious meal. It was delightful to see how those finalists who participated in previous National Oratorical Festivals, bonded with the first time finalists even before the ice breaker began.

Saturday started early with breakfast and the respective orientation sessions for the speakers and judges. After the invocation by His Eminence Archbishop Demetrios the junior division orators delivered their speeches. Introducing them by the speaker order number selected that morning, were two previous National Oratorical Festival participants. This year one of the popular and timely topics was: *In the Old Testament we read that there is "a time to keep silence and a time to speak" (Ecclesiastes 3:7). What is the value of silence and quiet when we are always "plugged in"?*

After a short intermission, the speakers in the senior division began their orations. Two of the popular topics addressed were: *How do you respond to people who question your belief in God and your participation in the life of the Church?* and *Human trafficking (i.e. the enslavement of women and children) remains a tragedy even today. We know that all human beings are created by God in His image (Genesis 1:27) therefore, how can we as Orthodox Christians help these victims and assist in the efforts to eliminate human trafficking?*

At the Awards Luncheon, which immediately followed, Rev. Fr. Steven Dalber, Protopresbyter of St. Nektarios, extended his greetings and talked about the quality of the speeches. He noted that when he heard the first speaker, he thought to himself, wow, this is the "winner." Then after the second, third and the ensuing speeches, he realized that everyone had a great speech and there was no way he could pick the best one. Serving as Master of Ceremonies for the luncheon was Rev. Fr. Angelo Artemas, Dean of Holy Trinity Cathedral in Charlotte. Fr. Angelo also talked about the importance of the spoken word.

The time for the presentation of awards finally arrived as all the junior division participants were asked to come to the stage. As each awardee was announced by Presvytera Margaret Orfanakos, Archdiocese Oratorical Festival Chairperson, Archbishop Demetrios, assisted by Dr. Anton C. Vrame, Director of the Department of Religious Education, and Fr. John Wallace, gave each person a plaque recognizing their participation at the National Oratorical Festival, a certificate, personally signed by Archbishop Demetrios and a \$1500 award from *FAITH: An Endowment for Orthodoxy and Hellenism Award*. In addition to these awards they also received a \$500 monetary gift from the Department of Religious Education. In addition to the top prize winners, named above, the following six individuals were the recipients of Honorable Mention. Direct Archdiocesan District: Nikiforos Papadopoulos-Holy Trinity Cathedral, Manhattan, NY; Metropolis of Boston: Alexandra Trant-Sts. Constantine & Helen Church, Andover, MA; Metropolis of Denver: Theodore Gallas-St. Basil the Great Church, Houston, TX; Metropolis of New Jersey: Christiana Kambouris-Sts. Constantine & Helen Church, Annapolis, MD; Metropolis of Pittsburgh: Emily Drenen-Sts. Constantine & Helen Church, Cleveland Heights, OH Metropolis of San Francisco: Catherine Baxter-St. Haralambos Church, Peoria, AZ.

Those receiving Honorable Mention in the senior division were: Metropolis of Atlanta: Elizabeth Courey, St. Katherine Church, Melbourne, FL; Metropolis of Boston: Kyros Vergados-Sts. Constantine & Helen Church, Andover, MA; Metropolis of Chicago: Dennis Polite- St. Andrew Church, Chicago, IL; Metropolis of Detroit: Alexa Shahine, St. Sophia Church, Syracuse, NY, Metropolis of San Francisco: Timothy Kaelin-St. George Church, Eugene, OR.

Before the conclusion of the Awards Luncheon, Archbishop Demetrios shared his thoughts about the speeches and talked about themes raised by the topics of this year's Festival. He spoke extensively about the tragedy of human trafficking and Christian persecution, reminding the audience that the 20th century alone saw more Christians martyred than all centuries prior. He also noted how the arts permeate the Orthodox Church, through the icons, the architecture the vestments, and music. He said that if a value could be placed on these, it would be in the billions of dollars, when one considers the size of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America.

After a quick change at the hotel, the finalists and their families went to the NASCAR Hall of Fame, where most jumped into a simulation of a stock car race. From there the group visited the Levine Museum of the New South for an elegant dinner and tour of the Museum. Archbishop Demetrios joined the group at the Museum, where he graciously posed for pictures with many finalists and their families. That afternoon, the Archbishop gave a talk to the parish about the Holy and Great Council in Crete. Even after a late night return to the hotel, some of the participants stayed up even later to talk before finally calling it a night.

Sunday morning, the Archbishop celebrated the Divine Liturgy at St. Nektarios, assisted by three priests and three deacons. At its conclusion, Archbishop Demetrios invited Eirene Stavropoulos and Christina Hanos to give their winning speeches. Once again everyone was invited to the community center for a farewell luncheon before saying their final farewells.

His Eminence Metropolitan Alexios of Atlanta was unable to attend because he was on a Pilgrimage to Mount Athos before flying to Istanbul and eventually to Crete for the Holy and Great Council. So once again the 2016 Oratorical Festival was an overwhelming success with 223 parishes participating and hundreds of teenagers learning and talking about their faith. Yes, the Oratorical Festival remains one of the most inspiring programs of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese.