

Interview with Father Meletios Christoferou

The American Café Sault St. Marie, Michigan

February 16th 1982

Interviewer: Mary Adams Bone

Translator: Peter Gianakura

Start of Interview

(I) This is the interview with Father Meletios Christoferou February 16th 1982. The first thing I'm interested in is that um I've been told you were told you came to United States you were offered a job at a very large congregation in New Jersey.

(FM) [Greek]

(I) I'm wondering why you came to Sault Sainte Marie

(FM) Astoria, long island, Saint James Parish

(I) Astoria ok I'm wondering why you came to Sault Sainte Marie instead

(FM) [Greek]

(Translator) I was sent here to help and replace all the Lutheran schools now he is seriously very ill with cancer and it was a temporary assignment Father Luke had passed away so it became a permanent one.

(I) What happened to the job offer in Astoria?

(FM) [Greek]

(T) He doesn't know what became of that opportunity it just vanished and something else must have taken over.

(I) Were you interested in it or not?

(FM) [Greek]

(T) He said the assignment here was temporary but after been for some time assisting Father Luke it he began to grow on him and he liked it, he likes this area he found that Astoria was probably much too large for his liking. This suited him much better.

(FM) [Greek]

(T) He put in close to 30 years of missionary work, which naturally entails a lot of traveling other cities still for long periods of time. This job in Astoria but necessitated his being staying in one spot. And that kinda went against his natural grade. So when he got here he realized that this little outpost in the Sault that many other branches he had to see Traverse City, Petoskey Wawa,

Sudbury and he thought jee am back in my old traveling days? My missionary work and it suited him. He liked that.

(I)I thought it might be something like that because I didn't know until recently that you had been a missionary in Africa and after I learned that, I made that same connection. [Laughs] I'd like to go back to the beginning and just ask you about the really the more less the time you were born tell me about your family... if you would and your family life in Cyprus as a child and how you happen to became interested in the churches as such a young man.

(FM) Greek

(T) He comes from a very poor family, his father was a laborer and he worked very hard for what little he had. The only other member of the family was his sister besides himself, she resides in Astoria, Long Island. He was going to school one fine day when a monk came by their village and by their home and persuaded his father that maybe this young boy would like to join him for a short stay at the monastery where he was going and continue his education. So he went. And he kind of liked it. As he grow older he noticed that he felt he had a good voice and many of his fellow monks told him he had a very good voice, which he does. Very nice. Archbishop came by the monastery to visit in Cyprus and to visit this particular monastery he had heard him singing and persuaded him to join him at the capital of Cyprus which was Nicosia. And um there he became a (Greek work).

(I)How old were you when this monk came by?

(T)He was 11 old.

(I)11 years old so that's when you.. um I'm going to turn this off.....And that was Cybrious the third then? That you were referring to the archbishop?

(FM) [Greek]...curious the third

(I)Now when were you ordained as a priest? And under what circumstances?

(FM) [Greek]

(T) He was ordained 55 years ago. That would be what 1927?

(I)That sounds right 1927. Yeah 1927.

(FM) [Greek]

(I)Keep your hand away from your mouth [laughs] When I played these tapes back I discovered that I could have the microphone, I could be sitting on the microphone and my voice comes through.

(T) and you wondered why other..

(I) No one else's comes through as mine. My husband had a few things to say about that. [laughs] This will come in beautifully but I might miss a few words here. I just have that kind of voice. Now ok I'd like to get back into now I'd like him to tell me about how he, how you came to sing for the patriarch in Alexandria? I'd heard...

(FM) [Greek]

(I) It sounds so interesting I don't understand a word of it...it does sound so interesting.

(T) About 1931 he became archdeacon which means he was a deacon to the archbishop, however in 1931 Cyprus was under the rule of it was one of the British colonies. And the Greek people did not like that they wanted their independence. So all of a sudden there was a sort of revolution that fell a tremendous unrest and he and several other priests felt so adamant about this independence.

(I) So there were other priests.....

(T) Yes, so they all partook in this. So I asked him do you pick up guns? No no no we took up sticks and whatever we could find. We were a revolutionary frame of mind because we didn't like this British rule.

(I) What did they do?

(T) Well they were captured and they were put in a sort of barbed wire compound.

(I) Did they actually fight with these sticks? Did you beat on people?

(FM) No no no

(I) Just waved them around (Laughs)

(FM) [Greek]

(T) We picked up these sticks and just hollered for independence. I guess they were in a compound. There's a place and he assumed I knew about it, because it's where much of the Greek Turkish, Turkish incipient upheavals took place. Pegasus is the name of the state.

(I) Do you know how to spell it?

(T) No I don't Pegasus. ph rather than an f. g o u s t

(I) Ph is what I would have. Phamagoufa.

(T) He was having coffee in this little coffee shop and a little man came by and uh greeted him in Greek and said "I've been away from Sidney, Australia".

(FM) [Greek]

(T) This little gentleman with a cane was a native of Cyprus but he went to Australia established himself there for 50 years. And after that time he went back to Cyprus to visit his family or

reacquaint himself with his native land and he happen to see the priest sitting there in this little coffee shop.

(I) wow this is after he got out of the compound?

(T) Yes, um and he asked him “Father here would you go back with him to Sidney as a teacher” because he knew he was he knew the gospels.

(I) To teach Greek?

(T) [Greek] Teacher of the Greek language

(FM) [Greek]

(T) The man persuade him to become a teacher in Sidney...

(I)...and a priest there also?

(FM) No

(T) Nope just a teacher. And he thought it was a rather challenging and whole new world for him. So he accepted it. And he got permission to get a three months leave of absence to do this. From his...

(I)A leave of absence from?

(T) From his Diocese from his archbishop. So the first leg of his journey took him to Port Said, Egypt on his way to Sidney, Australia.

(FM) [Greek]

(T) So there he is at Port Said he had a three day wait for his ship, so he got himself establish in a little hotel and he went downstairs for a coffee. As he was enjoying the coffee and reading the paper he felt a tap on his shoulder and he turned around and there was the bishop of Alexandria, Egypt of that particular territory. “What are you doing here he told the guy” “On my way to Sidney Australia to become a teacher for this community” of the blessing of the bishop the archbishop of Cyprus. No no no that can not be. He said that I want you and I need you in my... he had met him at the monastery coincidence ... This archbishop he said I need you in my patriarch and my diocese and sing for us cause he had heard him and teach and if you have any duties you can fulfill. I have a ticket and they trusted me with the money and I have my fair and what am I tell the bishop from Cyprus? I will take care of that he said.

(I) Now was this the patriarch himself

(FM) [Greek]

(T) The metropolitan

(I) The metropolitan?

(T) Yes the metropolitan.

(T) He said “Don’t move from here I’ll stay right here where you are drinking your coffee I’ll be back”.

(FM) [Greek]

(T) The metropolitan made arrangements and got his tickets all rearranged and he got on this train and next thing he knows he’s on this train and four hours on this train from Port Said to Alexandria. The metropolitan bishop took him to the patriarch of that particular area.

(I) Which was the patriarch of Alexandria?

(T) Yes and this I want to introduce you to this gentlemen to this priest because you had asked he said I guess they were looking for someone who would teach and also teach the singing.. the voice.. and they were looking for someone but they couldn’t quite find them then here this man appears.

(I) Teach voice now where?

(T) He was going to be the first psalter or first chanter of of this chanting remember when he mentioned metropolitan being a chanter.

(I) Oh yes.....

(T) Right well he was going to be in that position but for the patriarch.

(I) for the patriarch of Alexandria.. and to teach the chanting to others?

(FM) [Greek]

(T) The choir

(I) The choir to teach the choir

(T) So that evening they were having services and he had asked the chanter of a few different churches of that particular area to come and listen. So I guess he was more being more or less being auditioned.

(FM) [Greek]

(T) And that’s where he performed and that’s where he impressed them. He remember in those days I was a young man.. I was tall. He is a tall man. And thin. I was slider and taller.

(I) [laughs]

(FM) [Greek]

(T) It is costmary whenever they have services, to have, especially in this particular area where there patriarch was and all the chanters joined together but this particular time the patriarch made a request he sing by himself. And he was so impress that after the service that he was to these other chanters, he went to him and says “You are their teacher” it was quite flattering. He was with them in this position a choir master and head of the chanters for three years until the

patriarch died. After that... I guess they hold elections from what I understand. The metropolitan selected him saw him in this little coffee shop, he became patriarch. And it was through him see through all this time he was out of a deacon. And I think through all when he became a bishop he became a priest when this metropolitan became a patriarch he made him a priest. From what I understand I don't know.

(I) It doesn't quite fit the time period.

(T) Mm..

(I) But that's what it looks like I have here.

(FM) [Greek]

(T) Then he was assigned Port Sudan. He was there for one year I guess.

(FM) [Greek]

(I) No Eight years?

(T) Oh eight years?

(FM) [Greek]

(T) He says that's a mistake.

(I) That's a mistake oh. So one year.

(FM) [Greek]

(T) He says he couldn't stand the climate. It was tremendously hot. It was unbearable, unbearable heat. Right by the Red Sea.

(FM) [Greek]

(T) He received a letter about a year after from the metropolitan, he was now the patriarch. Telling him that he would like to have two positions he gave him a choice of two positions one was the head priest of the cathedral in Alexandria and also and or treasurer of the patriarch. And he was quite flattered at the um being given this privilege so he wrote back and thanked him very much for this offer but he said that he particularly thanked him for giving him a choice but he said I can not make a choice the choice is up to you to place me wherever you feel I am most needed for the church.

(FM) [Greek]

(T) He received a letter congratulating him for his remark.

(FM) [Greek]

(T) Was it a dedication?

(FM) [Greek]

(T) So he was giving the position or the job of being a missionary priest and he mentioned all these various places.

(FM) [Greek]

(T) Sudan, Congo Kenya, Rwanda, Tangier, Cameroon, the Gold Coast, Nigeria, Dakar, Libya, Algeria, Morocco, and Egypt. So he would travel..

(I) All these places..... all of them.

(T) Close to 35 years of travelling.

(FM) [Greek]

(T) He said most of his time was spent in the Congo. But his travels took him to all those places.

(FM) Congo 25 years. [Pounds on the table]

(T) 25 years

(FM) [Greek]

(T) All these travels took him all year he would be traveling these places but most of his travels were confined to the Congo area from what I understand.

(FM) [Greek]

(T) From that point on his life goes on it's what's written in here...

(I) Yes but I'm do you both have more time?

(FM) [Greek]

(T) He would like to make an addition about to his family.

(FM) [Greek]

(T) His mother didn't like the idea of him going to the monastery with this monk, his father was rather persistent but felt the practical matter, this was a chance for a good education and something that could be far better then what he had, a lot better opportunity. But the mother was very hurt about his doing, she'd like to have him home...well he went.

End of tape