

ARCHBISHOP IAKOVOS! A REMEMBRANCE!

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As a newcomer to America in 1953 with limited English, I was perplexed by a survey carried out by the university newspaper on whether a Catholic could be President of the USA. It seemed, perhaps out of ignorance and prejudice, some people feared that a Catholic would bring theocracy, I suppose of the type that happened in 1980 when the Ayatollah and his Islamists assumed power in chaotic Iran [Persia]. The answer came soon enough. In 1960, John Kennedy became the **first Roman Catholic** in the history of the USA to be elected President. But there on the black and white screen of the TV in January 1961, it was not the feared Pope from Rome, not even a Catholic bishop giving the prayer at the inauguration of President Kennedy, but a bearded **Greek Orthodox priest**, Archbishop Iakovos.

A few years later there was Archbishop Iakovos on the front cover of LIFE magazine standing next to **Martin Luther King**, the architect and martyr of the civil rights movement. Archbishop Iakovos was a pioneering and resolute foe of racial intolerance, of prejudice and discrimination. The civil rights movement helped not only the blacks, the African American minority that had been enslaved for centuries, but also other minorities, like us Greeks, Jews, Mexicans, Catholics, etc. He was awarded the Medal of Freedom by President Carter for his record on the defense of human rights. He fought against the violation of human rights by usurpers of power. He dared to oppose the army colonels who took over the government in Greece in a coup in 1967 and who in 1974 toppled Archbishop Makarios, an elected President of the Republic of Cyprus, triggering the tragic Turkish invasion and occupation to this day of one third of the island of Aphrodite. A talented and energetic leader, Archbishop Iakovos initiated and implemented many programs, some of which did not meet with universal approval, but that is the price of strong leadership.

He died at the age of 94 in April 2005, a week after they buried his friend Pope John Paul II [*see photo*]. But it was the earlier meeting with Pope John the 23rd in 1959, the year he was enthroned as Archbishop of North and South America, which was **historic**. He was the **first Orthodox official** to meet formally with the Pope of Rome in almost 4 centuries. Of course, the meeting was orchestrated by **Ecumenical Patriarch Athinagoras** who finally met with the Pope of Rome in 1964. Those 3 hierarchs began the thawing of the relations between the churches, which were frozen for 10 centuries since the crucial Schism of the original Church in 1054.

Pope John Paul II went as far as to return in 2005 to the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Constantinople the relics of John the Chrysostom and Gregory the Theologian, two hierarchs who are revered as saints in both churches for their work in the ecumenical councils. John Chrysostom wrote the liturgical service used by both churches and even Protestants. The relics were pilfered by the unruly crusaders whose goal was supposedly to liberate Jerusalem, but spent much of their time in Constantinople pilfering the riches of **Byzantium**. Pope John Paul II apologized for the damage caused by the **Crusades**, when he visited Greece a few years ago, but the main ecclesiastical and political problems for the unification of the churches remain unresolved.

The 1972 clergy laity conference was in Houston. I was a delegate from our church along with Father Sarris and Jim Jelett who was the community president at the time. The keynote address was given by the then Vice President, the Greek American Spiro Agnew. The conference was cut short, when the sad news of the death of Patriarch Athinagoras reached us. With tears running down our cheeks, we assembled for a farewell service. Archbishop Iakovos ordered the priests to depart immediately to their parishes for memorial service for the beloved Patriarch.

I asked **Father Sarris**, our priest for 29 years from 1962 to 1991, for a comment. They were good friends. He had Iakovos as a teacher at the theological seminary in the 1940s. He remembers him as being very strict, demanding, a disciplinarian who “kept reminding us to always be priests first and foremost. Archbishop Iakovos reminds me a lot of Pope John Paul II”, said Father Sarris, who is shown in the photo receiving the blessing of Patriarch Athinagoras and Archbishop Iakovos. Archbishop Iakovos visited Columbus to dedicate the Solomonides recreation hall in the 1970s. By the way, the **Ohio State University** honored Iakovos with a doctor degree.



Of course, there have been many Greek Americans who have become national personalities, such as: VP Spiro Agnew, Senators Sarbanes and Tsongas, Representative Brademas, Michael Dukakis running for President in 1988, CIA Director George Tenet, et al. However, if there is one man who can be credited for single-handedly making us stand tall, both as Greeks and as Greek Orthodox, it was Archbishop Iakovos. Archbishop Iakovos was a clergyman of **global reputation**. He was on amicable terms with every one of the 7 American Presidents who served after he became USA citizen in 1950, with the political and religious leaders of Greece, the world council of churches, but not with the Turks.

He was born in 1911 on the Greek island of Imvros, which was regrettably ceded to **Turkey** by the British in 1923. Iakovos was well qualified to succeed Athinagoras. As a Turkish citizen, he could have been enthroned in Constantinople as patriarch in 1972, had it not been for his public and unrelenting lobbying of the American government and others against the dismal record of Turkey on human rights not only against the Greeks, the Kurds, and the Armenians but also against their own people. The army generals who at that time controlled the government in Turkey declared Iakovos *persona non grata* and would not even allow him to visit our Patriarchate in Constantinople.

I shall never forget Archbishop Iakovos. He was fearless, showed grace under stress, had a commanding presence with his handsome features, and no one can deny his devotion to our religion and to our **Hellenic heritage**. Keep in mind that some of our most revered saints were powerful men who used their position to promote their religion. Although he resigned in 1996, hierarch Iakovos remained active, continued to push for ecumenism among the 170 or more Christian denominations, and will be remembered by those of us he touched.