

Daily Herald

‘It’s the emphasis on mysticism and prayer’: Suburban Greek Orthodox churches mark Easter amid membership boom

Posted April 11, 2026 1:00 pm
Madhu Krishnamurthy

The pews at suburban Greek Orthodox churches are bursting at the seams this Easter Sunday.

Leaders say this surge in new members stems from grass-roots efforts and outreach after the pandemic.

A diverse mix of new faces now includes Latino, Russian, Polish, Filipino, African American and Japanese Americans. Many are converting to Orthodoxy from Catholic, Protestant, Evangelical and non-denominational backgrounds.

At St. Nectarios Greek Orthodox Church in Palatine, membership is growing rapidly. They expect dozens of new converts by year’s end, up from 23 in 2019. About 625 longtime parish families have returned since 2023, and Sunday attendance has nearly doubled from 200 to 385, according to church leaders.



Father Chris Mihalopoulos blesses parishioners with rose water during the traditional Good Friday service at St. Nectarios Greek Orthodox Church in Palatine. [John Starks/jstarks@dailyherald.com](mailto:John.Starks@dailyherald.com)

“It’s not just about families coming to the church, but we’re witnessing people who are disenfranchised with the Orthodox Church coming back,” said Chris Mihalopoulos, parish priest at St. Nectarios. “And then we are seeing the newer phenomenon ... of inquirers who are interested in the Orthodox Christian faith.”

Greek Orthodox parishes in Aurora, Elgin, Lincolnshire, Niles, and parts of Chicago are also growing. They report increases in membership, baptisms, and chrismations, reflecting national trends.

Surveys from **Pew Research** suggest decades of declining church membership may be leveling off or even reversing in some Christian communities.

At the 52-year-old St. Nectarios, young adults ranging from 18 to 30 years old and families predominantly make up the majority of new members.



About 1,500 people followed a Epitaphios, a representation of the tomb of Christ, through the parking lot of St. Nectarios Greek Orthodox Church in Palatine during the traditional Good Friday service. *John Starks/jstarks@dailyherald.com*

“We have various ministries from infants all the way up to the elderly,” Mihalopoulos said.

He also cited philanthropic efforts, outreach, evangelism, schools and committees that exist to engage new members and draw others to the church.

Since 2019, the church has expanded its outreach beyond Palatine to the greater Northwest suburban area. Its popular Greek Fest in June attracts many, with part of the proceeds going to local charities, Mihalopoulos said.

“Our community, with its ministries and its faithful, are embodying the Christian call to love all of God’s people, and we are doing this in action,” he said. “Another thing we’re getting better at it is socializing together.”



As parishioners stoop under the Editaphios, a representation of the tomb of Christ, Father Chris Mihalopoulos and Father Patrick O'Rourke, left, bless them with rose water as they reenter St. Nectarios Greek Orthodox Church in Palatine during the traditional Good Friday service. They had followed the Editaphios through a procession around the parking lot. *John Starks/jstarks@dailyherald.com*

Many converts are attracted to Orthodoxy's connection to the early church, its beautiful rituals, and its theology of union with God. In today's fragmented society, its focus on belonging and meaning feels countercultural, according to leaders.

"I would say it's the emphasis on mysticism and prayer more than on reason and debate" that is drawing people to the faith, said Metropolitan Nathanael Symeonides, the bishop of Chicago who oversees Greek Orthodox churches in six Midwestern states.

"Doesn't matter what faith you are — you could be of no faith at all — there's this innate desire to be held and to be loved," Symeonides said. "It's an experience of divine love in our church through not only our worship and our kind of rituals. Those are just kind of the initial thing that people are gravitating to. They see something new, and it moves their heart."



About 1,500 parishioners hold candles and wait to reenter St. Nectarios Greek Orthodox Church in Palatine after following the Epitaphios, which represents the tomb of Christ, through the parking lot during a traditional Good Friday service. *John Starks/jstarks@dailyherald.com*

Symeonides said he has seen a resurgence of interest in the Orthodox Church across the Midwest and other parts of the country since the pandemic heightened social isolation within communities.

“People are not just looking for dogma, they're not just looking for history, they're not just looking for ritual. They can get that, and they can get it in a lot of places,” he said. “They're coming because they do long for a deeper, meaningful relationship with a community and with God.

Despite 2,000 years of existence, Symeonides said the church still has “new experiences” to offer.

“It’s this new experience of love that they've never experienced this way before,” Symeonides believes. “It’s not sterile, it’s not legalistic, it’s not limiting and restrictive. It’s actually quite liberating.”