

TELEGRAPH HERALD

Regional leaders of Catholic, Greek Orthodox churches meet, discuss unity

BY KONRAD STRZALKA

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His Eminence Metropolitan Nathanael (Symeonides) of Chicago takes a turn at bat on Friday at the Field of Dreams in Dyersville, Iowa. He is in the midst of a three-day visit to Dubuque County. Contributed

The leader of the Greek Orthodox faith in much of the Midwest met his Dubuque-based Roman Catholic counterpart Friday. While the two entered the meeting strangers, they left brothers.

His Eminence Metropolitan Nathanael (Symeonides) of Chicago is in the midst of a three-day visit to Dubuque County to meet with members of St. Elias the Prophet Greek Orthodox Church, 419 N. Grandview Ave. The Greek Orthodox Metropolis of Chicago consists of 58 parishes and two monasteries in Illinois, Iowa, Indiana, Minnesota, Wisconsin and Missouri.

Nathanael met Archbishop Thomas Zinkula to discuss their lives and work as bishops, challenges and opportunities facing the Christian faith, and interdenominational unity.

“We’re called to be one — not just Orthodox and Catholics, but all Christians, all who profess the Lord Jesus Christ as their savior,” Nathanael said.

“That’s what (Jesus) wants for us — to be together,” Zinkula added. “If we’re going to be an effective witness to the world ... it doesn’t help that we’re seen as divided rather than united.”

Nathanael said he considers Catholic bishops to be his “brothers.”

“If you can’t be friends, if you can’t know each other, then how can you address the pain and suffering of the world? If we’re not friends, we don’t trust; and if we don’t trust, we can’t really work together, let alone love one another,” he said. “For me, these types of meetings are important, personally, to meet another brother bishop, but also to build friendships.”



His Eminence Metropolitan Nathanael of Chicago (left) and Archbishop Thomas Zinkula meet at the Archdiocese of Dubuque office on Friday. Stephen Gassman, Telegraph Herald

Zinkula said he felt a bond with Nathanael, who expressed an interest in having more shared experiences with Zinkula, such as pilgrimages to Christian holy sites.

Nathanael's visit is special to the Rev. Adrian Letz, parish priest of St. Elias. Many members of the congregation, which has welcomed around two dozen new members in recent years amid [a surge of interest in Orthodoxy](#), are meeting their spiritual leader for the first time.

"Because (the metropolis) is so spread out geographically ... (Metropolitan Nathanael) can't be at all places at all times," Letz said. "It's always special for us to receive him. People who never met him can get to know him. He's very personable."

Nathanael said interest in Orthodoxy has been growing not just in Dubuque.

"A few years ago, I don't know that there was any one of my priests that wasn't worried — worried that things were rapidly declining," he said. "During or after COVID, there's been a surge.... If people are searching for Christ and finding a home where they can rest in Christ, that's really good. Practically speaking, it's great because our parishes can now continue to serve; they can have active, thriving ministries. I also think it's good that we still had a presence in Iowa, we didn't give up that quickly, even though it was quite scary for some time."

A surge in members, however, can come with its own challenges.

"We need more priests because we have more people to care for, and that's been a challenge for us," Nathanael said. "But we thank God for these kinds of challenges because he provides at all times. He's provided people to come fill our churches again, and he'll provide the men who will go and respond to his call to serve in ordained ministry."



His Eminence Metropolitan Nathanael (Symeonides) of Chicago visits the Field of Dreams in Dyersville, Iowa, on Friday. Contributed
Dubuque County is Nathanael's second stop on a tour of Iowa that kicked off in Sioux City.

"It used to be I would fly in or drive to a church, celebrate the liturgy and go back to Chicago, and I realized I can't get to know people that way, so I'm in Iowa for two weeks," Nathanael said.

Prior to his meeting with Zinkula on Friday, Nathanael — a New York Yankees fan — visited the Field of Dreams in Dyersville, Iowa. At 9 a.m. today, Nathanael will lead a hierarchical liturgy at St. Elias with Letz. His next stops are Waterloo, Cedar Rapids, Des Moines and the Quad Cities.

"There's worship, but it's more about getting to know the people, being among them, and them getting to know me a little bit," Nathanael said.