

9/11 (2011)
10TH ANNIVERSARY SPEECH

offered by George Zaverdinos

Reverend Clergy, Distinguished Parish Council members, fellow Parishioners, good morning.

On this, the 10th anniversary of a most tragic and unforgettable day in our personal lives as well as that of our nation's history, Americans gather at various places throughout the country and globe in remembrance. United in purpose as a community, we assemble on this day to reflect, mourn, console, pray, and pay homage to family members, friends and colleagues – those taken from us too soon on September 11th, 2001.

It was a bright, crisp Tuesday morning ten years ago today, when many lives were unexpectedly altered by orchestrated suicide attacks on the United States of America, as 19 al-Qaeda terrorists hijacked four commercial jet airliners and unleashed them as deadly missiles. People all over the world remember where they were and what they were doing on that horrific early morning, when the first assault commenced with American Airlines Flight 11 being flown into North Tower 1 of the World Trade Center in New York City at 8:46 a.m.

At first, many watching or hearing about it either thought, this can't be real and it has to be a science fiction movie, or believed the event to be an accident – a simple pilot error. News of the crash preempted most regularly scheduled radio and television programs as cameramen and photographers captured flames, billowing smoke, terror and human despair. As reporters and pedestrians continued filming, snapping photos and watching the skies, another plane, United Airlines Flight 175, soared into South Tower 2 at 9:02 a.m. We now knew with certainty that on this clear, beautiful day that became darkened with black smoke and its stench, America was without a doubt under attack.

Before any of us could absorb the shock of the tragedies of innocent lives lost in New York City, another strike was being executed as one more hijacked jetliner was headed toward Washington, D.C. At 9:37 a.m., American Airlines Flight 77 pierced into the western perimeter of the Pentagon, headquarters of America's military operations. On that day my life was also forever changed as some who I knew and served with, including one of my former students, died that day; it was only by the grace of God I was spared and then became involved in recovery efforts.

Learning that their plane had also been seized, passengers on United Airlines Flight 93 telephoned loved ones to let them know of their predicament and say their final good-byes. At 10:03 a.m. they all died as heroes, as they retook the commandeered aircraft, crashing it into a field near Shanksville, Pennsylvania rather than allowing it to go on to its intended target, believed to be either the U.S. Capitol or the White House.

The terror and chaos at the World Trade Center or Pentagon following the attacks are unimaginable. Now, who would be brave enough to confront the infernos and charge into the indescribable devastation and death, in efforts to avert further destruction and save the lives of trapped victims?

On that fateful day, we and the entire world learned a lot about the true meaning of '**HERO**'. First responders, which included firefighters, police officers, emergency medical technicians and paramedics, soldiers, a multitude of off duty responders, construction workers and ordinary people risked their lives to help evacuate and save as many people as possible from the badly damaged, burning and collapsed Twin Towers, as well as from the Pentagon. On that day, America found heroes in the 343 New York City fire fighters and 60 police officers who unselfishly sacrificed all when the World Trade Center towers collapsed around them as they struggled to get everyone out. Also, with immeasurable courage, scores of other heroic men and women perished along with the victims inside each building and aboard each plane so that others might live. **Let us forever honor those heroes.**

As a result of the four aerial assaults targeting our Country on that infamous day, 2,753 lives were lost in New York City, another 184 in Arlington, VA, and 40 were killed in Shanksville, PA. In total, 2,977 innocent people perished, which include over 400 rescue workers who were killed and more than 6,291 were injured.

Since the atrocities of a decade ago, many sayings are linked with it such as, "*We will never forget.*" Certainly, Americans will **never** forget the day when thousands of innocent persons, their parents, siblings, spouses, children and friends, were lost. September 11th is also known as "*The day the United States once again became united*" and also as "*The day the world changed*" because most citizens of the world banded together to help each other get through the harrowing events and the outcome of that day.

Undoubtedly, the entire world was affected by and reacted to the unprovoked attacks, and perhaps as a result of the devastations that day, our world indeed changed. As positives in the aftermath of 9/11, if for but a short period of time, out of many we became one as countless of volunteers and programs emerged to help unite us in strength and offer hope for peace and healing. If for but a short period of time, a transformation took place as we became friendlier neighbors. If for but a short period of time, people became more polite and kinder to one another.

Americans were also moved by heartfelt condolences and sentiments offered by citizens and leaders from over hundreds of other nations. As American citizens, hearing the National Anthem or renditions of 'God Bless America' played in other countries as well as our own, gave us a renewed sense of patriotism and brought tears to the eyes of most; American flags were also proudly displayed outside of homes and buildings.

At the 9/11 World Trade Center disaster, there were series of 'coincidences' that became symbols of healing, hope and faith for rescue and recovery workers at Ground Zero – and through them, the rest of us. Perhaps the most amazing 'coincidence' occurred two days after the attacks, when steel girders shaped like a cross were discovered standing upright in the ruins of 6 World Trade Center. Within moments, those at the location understood exactly what this cross meant: the God who suffered on a cross for us was now suffering **with us** over this large-scale human malice. No theologian had to interpret. No translators were needed. No Cleric had to come and bless it – for this Cross had already been sanctified by a Higher Authority to identify not merely a burial site but sacred ground, and to serve as an iconic sign of faith for many and a resurrecting hope for **all mankind**. Based on their own personal commentaries, many agnostics and members of several other faith groups, to include cynical media correspondents recognized the point of such a **Divine Symbol**.

Yes, ten years later, with **Faith, Hope and an unyielding American Spirit we have risen from the ashes**. Ours is a free, diverse Country and it is because of our liberty and ethnic mixture that we stand strong, united as one people and will continue to persevere. While many will pause to reflect upon and honor the memory of loved ones as we are doing here, we must all resolve never to permit the evil acts of a few to keep us from our mission of hope. Ours is a land which prides itself on active citizenship. Let us therefore be mindful and resolute that their deaths, like their lives, shall have **true meaning** – it is up to us to ensure positive and everlasting goodness sprouts from that dreadful catastrophe.

In memory of those honored today, beyond this ceremony of remembrance we share, as God's stewards of this earth we must reach out to help one another, the suffering – the ailing, poor, homeless, desolate, abused, children and aged. Let us therefore rededicate ourselves to once again transform into that caring society which offers hope and makes a positive difference for a better world just as we did ten long years ago – **it must not take another tragedy to bring us together!**

Today, as we memorialize their lives, we are all so thankful – thankful for their lives, and so thankful for the short time we had to share with them. **In Proverbs 9:11 we read: "For by Me thy days shall be multiplied, and the years of thy life shall be increased."** While we continue to miss our family members, friends and colleagues lost to us a decade ago, we must remain faithful and believe that truly they live on – for the years of their lives have surely been increased in **His Heavenly Kingdom.**

My fellow Parishioners, WE WILL NEVER FORGET, as on September 11, 2001 our way of life and the world did change - WE WILL NEVER FORGET, as on that day the United States once again became united - WE WILL NEVER FORGET, as on that day the small Holy Greek Orthodox Church of Saint Nicholas was demolished and turned into a pile of rubble - WE WILL NEVER FORGET, as on that day courageous heroes sacrificed their lives so that others might live - WE WILL NEVER FORGET, as on that day 2,977 LOVED ONES LEFT THIS EARTH AND BECAME IMMORTAL - **WE WILL NEVER FORGET!**

May their memory be eternal and may the grace and love of our Almighty God continue to Bless, comfort and strengthen us, and the United States of America.

I thank you.