

«ΓΝΩΣΙΣ» (KNOWLEDGE) FROM THE HELLENIC SCHOOL MINISTRY

Hellenic Dance Festival (HDF), the Ancient Olympic Games and the «ΑΜΙΛΙΑ» of the Ancient Hellenes (Greeks)

Dear youth members and fellow parishioners,

With this letter, we would like to inaugurate a series of articles as a contribution of our Hellenic (Greek) School ministry to the reinforcement of our Orthodox Christian teachings and values. In case you are not familiar, the word *Γνώσις* (pronounced 'GHNOH-sees') in the series title above means knowledge, and it was set by the ancient Hellenes (Greeks) as the ultimate goal, an ideal, of their education. Its meaning wasn't referring just to being familiar with some information or contextual definitions superficially, but it actually meant the achievement of a deeper understanding of a concept or topic at the ultimate level through contemplation, experience, soul searching, and living. The ancient Greeks even used different terms, like *επίσταμαι* ('eh-BPEE-stah-meh') and *οίδα* ('EE-thah') among others, to define the various stages in the learning process, creating a deeper level of belief through knowledge.

Moving on with our topic, this year's 10th **Hellenic Dance Festival (HDF)** will take place in Orlando, FL on the 15th-18th of January, and our coaches, Michael Rallis, Antonia Ioannou, Nota Dukas and Zaharoula Katsikis have been working hard with the support of Fr. Matthew, our Youth advisors, and the participants' parents to prepare our dancing and choral groups for this important event, engineered by our Metropolis of Atlanta. In case you would like to learn more about the HDF, please check the http://atlanta.goarch.org/index.php?pr=Hellenic_Dance link on the Metropolis' website. Its main objective is to bring our youth together in Orthodox Christian fellowship through a quest of exploring, discovering, living, learning, and experiencing the Hellenic culture and heritage. The Hellenic folk dances and songs stress family bonds and promote fellowship so it is obvious then why the HDF motto is "The Hellenic heritage keeps us together in the church".

Since HDF is a performance festival it is, and should be, a celebration and a fun event while it also introduces a certain level of competition among the various groups. As such, there has been a certain number of cases in the past, which is fortunately small thus far, when certain groups or participants exhibited a not-so-Christian attitude toward their competitors or in response to the judging results. When I was living in Tallahassee, FL and used to coach the dancing groups of the Holy Mother of God GOC there, I can recall one time when my dancers became the recipients of a negative attitude from a few participants from another church. These few cases, which contradict the spirit of fellowship that HDF promotes, have even drawn the attention of the Metropolitan Alexios and have also become a concern of the HDF Committee that has been working on ways to address this issue. In an effort to ensure that the competing groups move toward the Orthodox Christian youth tenets the committee has even introduced a new judging system this year. According to the new system the participating groups will now be judged only on their own merits and not directly ranked against any other group. Although 'external' measures like the new judging system can be helpful, these might not be adequate without the additional use of more 'internal', self-reflective measures. More specifically, we (and especially our youth) might ask, "How can I compete in a positive and a Christian way then?"

First of all, there is nothing wrong in general with the concept of competition per se. Certainly, everybody agrees that competition can be used, like many tools, to achieve different purposes. It can be extremely useful when used in a positive manner, and it can be extremely harmful when used in a negative way. Here is where the notion of **healthy competition**, which is compatible with our Orthodox Christian way of life, comes into play. The Orthodox Christian teachings and youth tenets can help us become healthy competitors, and Fr. Matthew, our Metropolis, and our Archdiocese work diligently to constantly provide guidance through sermons, Sunday School, retreats and a variety of other programs. The HDF Committee also has been having mandatory religious workshops for our youth during the festival. So, the question now is, "How can our Hellenic School Ministry assist in reinforcing the teachings and the values of our church?" One might be surprised to find out that the teachings of the ancient Greek philosophers that we study in the Hellenic School might actually be quite Christian!

From our Hellenic studies, we learn that early Greece was the birthplace of Western philosophical ethics. The word **ethics** per se comes from the Greek word *ἦθος* (EE-thos) meaning 'moral character or ethos'. The various codes of moral values developed by the ancient Hellenes introduced the notions of *Αρετή* (ah-reh-DTEE) meaning 'virtue', 'excellence', 'goodness' or 'reaching one's highest human potential'; *Κακία* (kah-KEE-ah) meaning 'vice'; and *Ιδέα* (ee-THEH-ah) meaning 'ideal, ideal Form or true essence of a thing'. In a few words, one's goal is to reach as close to the ideals as possible and achieve a character full of virtues that also could bring *Ευδαιμονία* (eh-vthemoh-NEE-ah) meaning 'happiness' or 'well-being'. On the other hand, vices act as obstacles in this process and cause corruption of and deviation from the virtues. Various systems of virtues and vices have been extensively studied and presented by the greatest Hellenic philosophers like Plato (428/427-348/347 BC) in his