

# *An Old Fashioned Greek Christmas*

By Aphrodite Matsakis



one looks healthy!

Oh how I hated those chocolate cupcakes! Generally I loved sweets, but the chocolate cupcakes served by the Philoptochos at Greek school recess were the direst funniest tasting cupcakes I ever had in my entire life. And that frosting! To this day I haven't figured out what those kindly women who ran the Philoptochos put in that frosting. Maybe they should have stuck with Greek pastries and left American delicacies, like chocolate cupcakes, alone.

One day our Greek school teacher, Father George, announced that Philoptochos was no longer going to supply us with cupcakes. They were going to use the money to sponsor a poor family in Greece instead.

I rejoiced, but the other kids protested. Some even threatened to quit Greek school. After all, the only reason they came was because their parents forced them to and, because of those chocolate cupcakes. Sure the cupcakes were a little odd tasting. But there were always more than enough and the yayias of Philoptochos never stopped anyone from having three, four, or even five cupcakes if they wanted.

"We want cupcakes! We want cupcakees!" some of the children chanted. This greatly angered Father George, who interpreted their protests as signs of gross disrespect. Meanwhile I sighed with relief. At last! I would no longer have to force myself to eat one of those plastic tasting terrors, or find yet another way to crumble it in a napkin and get rid of it as inconspicuously as possible.

In the past, whenever I'd say I didn't want a cupcake, Father George would look horrified. Hadn't my parents and other Greek-American parents sacrificed so that we could have not only a Greek afternoon school, but chocolate cupcakes as well? To reject the cupcakes was tantamount to rejecting God, Christ, the Acropolis, Aristotle, and one's relatives to boot. Looking back now, I wonder how those chalky cupcakes ever rose to the status of holy bread.

Father George would then holdout both his hands. In one he held a cupcake. I was supposed to take the cupcake, then kneel and kiss his other hand, as was the custom.

Being a good Greek girl, I saw no choice but to follow tradition and say, "Malista, Pater," and kiss his hand without getting any saliva on it. Then I'd reverently take the cupcake, wait until he wasn't looking, roll it in a ball and quickly drop it into my lap. From there I would usher it into my socks and then to the nearest toilet or wastebasket.

Father George caught me a few times, though. This caused me to stay up nights figuring out even craftier ways of disposing of those hated cupcakes.

After the cupcake announcement, Father George then announced that in a few weeks, right before

Christmas a family of ten would be joining our community. A mother, father, their four children and four orphans they had taken in were coming from war torn Greece.

On pain of going to hell, he cautioned us not to laugh at the children for talking funny, wearing old clothes, or having deformities. One of the children, he warned, was missing an eye; another, a leg. Some of them were missing teeth. The girls and the mother would be wearing scarves which covered their hair, and their dresses would go almost down to the floor, to cover their legs, as was the custom in Greek villages.

The scarves might be shabby and the dresses out of fashion, but we were not to ridicule them. Instead, we were to go home to our closets and empty them of every piece of clothing and of every toy which we did not need to give to these children. The kids were of all ages, so whatever we had could be used. Furthermore, we were not only to give our "junk," but something precious to us. "That would please God greatly," he added.

I groaned. I didn't mind giving up old clothes and toys, but I wasn't going to give up my new pink dress with all the ruffles. I loved that dress. I decided that when I got home that night, I would hide it. That way, in case Father George sent home a notice about giving up something precious, my parents wouldn't force me to give it up.

I hadn't even worn that dress yet. But I had dreamed of wearing it and looking like a princess. In real life, I didn't look like a princess, but in that dress I was positive I would finally feel like one.

At dinner that night, there were several Greek friends. As usual, there was heated discussion about the socio-economic status of Greece following WW II and the civil war which followed. Despite all the talk about the civil war, both at home and at church, at age 10, all I knew about the Greek civil war was that it made a lot of Greeks turn red in the face and fume. Others didn't turn red in the face, but in the eyes. Outside the church on Sundays, while the priest finished the liturgy, grown men wailed for dead relatives, the destruction of their villages and way of life. Inside the church, their mothers and grandmothers made the sign of the cross more than the three necessary times. Unlike their more Americanized sisters, these women did not hesitate to fall on their knees in "metanias," thanking God that they had made it out alive.

Most of the Greek Americans I knew, my parents included, were all so busy arguing, grieving, or otherwise emoting about the situation, that none of them had time to explain to me what the Civil War was really all about. All I knew was that it was horrible and that what the Greeks did to other Greeks during the civil war was almost, but not quite as bad, as what Hitler did not the Jews,

or so it certainly felt to some of the survivors.

"So what are you going to give up for the new family?" my parents asked.

I gulped. "I'm going to give three school dresses and three party dresses, one for the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit."

I was hoping that if I brought the Holy Trinity into it, my parents would be so impressed by my piety and holiness that they wouldn't ask any more questions, like, "what" three dresses. I was hoping especially they wouldn't ask me to give up my new pink dress with the ruffles.

"Are you only going to give them your old clothes? How about some of your new ones?" my parents asked pointedly.

"Oh no, I'm not going to give them junk," I replied, then proceeded to itemize the articles I would contribute.

"But all those things are used. How do you think you would feel if all you had to wear was somebody else's old clothes. What about giving them something new too?"

"But I don't have anything new," I lied.

"Yes you do. How about that pink dress with the ruffles. I hear one of the girls is your age. I'll bet she's never had a new dress in her life. Just think how happy you will make her."

All I could think about what how unhappy I would be without that dress.

"Sure," I lied again. "She can have it. I don't like it that much anyway. In fact, I was looking for it, but I just can't find it. I look somemore after dinner. If I can find it, she can have it."

"That's a good girl," my parents said, nodding approvingly.

Maybe they'll forget, I wished.

My wish came true. When the clothes for the new family were packed up, nobody noticed that my dream dress was missing.

I didn't think about the family again, until one day, unannounced, they came to our Greek school class.

A Philoptochos lady interrupted Father George's impassioned explanation on the differences between an *oxia* and a *perispomeni* to ask Father George what to do with the new family. They had only been in America two days and had just gotten off the train from New York.

We were all commanded to stand as Father George ushered the family into our classroom.

The look of poverty was all over them. Their threadbare clothing, although neatly patched, failed to hide their pitifully thin bodies. Their eyes, innocent, but frightened, told of deprivations and pain unknown to any Greek kid born in America.

I was attempting to distance myself from their pain by trying to

figure out which were the Pappas kids and which were the orphans, when suddenly Mrs. Pappas burst into tears. She got her knees and almost kissed Father George's feet. "You saved us, You saved us," she wept.

Father George gently lifted her up.

"No, God saved you. I only wish we could have brought your entire village.

"Welcome to America, my sister and all of you. You are fellow Greeks and our sisters and brothers in Christ."



All my life I had resented Father George. I saw him as a mean taskmaster bent on maintaining tradition at all costs. At times he was oppressive in enforcing traditions. But at this moment, he seemed like one of the most wonderful men in the world, for I knew he had begun and vigorously supported the movement to bring this family to America.

One by one, the Pappas children kissed Father George's hand, then shyly turned to our Greek school class and thanked us for helping them.

Piece by piece, my heart broke.

None of the children really smiled. Had they forgotten how?

One of the young boys was missing an eye. His older brother had a vacuous look, as if he was in some distant land full of sadness. Another boy looked normal, but one leg was almost three inches shorter than the other.

A famished girl holding a young child with bad burn scars all over its

face, legs, and arms was the last to come forth. She was my age. When it was this girl's hand to kiss the priest's hand, she was too frightened to move.

"Ela Maria, min fovase, (Come on Maria, don't be afraid," Mr. Pappas said.

Maria shook as she kissed the priest's hand, then ran back to her place without saying a word to our class.

I wondered what she was more ashamed of, her plain brown dress on her dilapidated shoes. I later found out that she was one of the orphans and the child she was carrying was all that was left of her family.

Her parents, innocent peasants, had been accused of being spies by one side or the other. They had been bound by ropes in their village hut, along with their small son, interrogated, then tortured. The soldiers then set fire to their home and left them to die.

Maria and her older brother Tasos then crept out of their hiding place and tried to save their parents and baby brother. Maria grabbed the baby, while Tasos tried to drag his unconscious parents out of the flames. However, the weight of the two bodies was too much for Tasos. He collapsed from the strain and the smoke and perished with them.

After the fire stopped, Maria removed the gold crosses from the bodies. She then ran into the **mountains, not knowing where she was going, until she found a cave in which to hide. Maria and her brother would have perished had not the Pappas shared their bread with them.**

When the Pappas's first saw Maria, they asked **what happened to her family. Maria opened her mouth, but could say nothing. She had been so traumatized, she could no longer speak.**

Mr. Pappas then **thanked us all for helping to bring them to America. He promised that he and his family would try to give back to our community and way possible--by cleaning and scrub--bing or doing whatever was necessary either in the church or the Greek school. His wife and some of the older girls would do baking and sewing for the church and church members.**

Also, on behalf of Maria, he was going to donate some gold crosses to the church. These were the same crosses Maria had taken off the bodies of her dead parents and brother. Although she could no longer speak, she had written Mr. Pappas a note indicating that she wanted to give them to Father George, to use as he felt fit.

Mr. Pappas apologized that he did not have any jewelry to give the church, but he had sold all of it long ago for bread.

As Mr. Pappas pulled the crosses out of his tattered pocket, there was not a dry eye or dry heart in the entire room.

Suddenly all the Greek school and Sunday school lessons became real to me.

This is it, I thought. This is Greekness. This is Christianity.

I half expected Father George to use Maria's offer as a way of springing into one of his favorite lectures about the selfishness and ingratitude of all us Greek-American kids. But, thank God, he did not ruin the moment by launching into one of his antimaterialistic diatribes.

Instead he wrapped the crosses in white tissue and handed them back to Maria. Very lightly, he kissed her head and prayed for her.

I was filled not only with sentiment, but with shame. Here the Pappas shared whatever little food they had with some orphan children and Maria was even willing to give up all that was left of her family, and I couldn't give up one little dress.

That night, I went home and wrapped up the pink dress in the prettiest box I could find. With it, I put some of my favorite jewelry, some scarves, and some colognes. I was so excited about giving Maria the box, I adorned it with four bows.

Giving often feels like a sacrifice, and often it is. But looking back, giving Maria that box, was one of the happiest moments of my childhood.

Tragically, there are still many Marias in the world, both close and far away. One possibility for your compassion is the Cyprus Children's Fund, 13 East 40th Street, New York, NY 10016.

