

«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 *ἰδέα* (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 *Republic* and *Statesman* and Aristotle (384–322 BC) in his *Ethics*, *Politics*, and *Rhetoric* among others. In addition, it is well known that Socrates (470–399 BC) developed the **Socratic Method**, which is a form of teaching that used a question and answer format, to help his students see things for themselves using their own reason. His methods of teaching are

still used to this day. Socrates was also teaching his students to come to realize first that «*Εν οίδα ότι ουδέν οίδα*» (“I know one thing, that I know nothing”) in order to subsequently use the **Socratic Method** properly and work toward the «*Γνώθι σεαυτόν*» (“Know thyself”) to achieve true knowledge of themselves. Also according to Socrates, “*Αρετή* (virtue) is knowledge”. It has been established that the ideas of the ancient Hellenic philosophers greatly influenced Christian thought and more information and discussion on that and the Greek systems of ethical thinking could be the topic of a future article. So, how could we now put all of the above together?

Ancient Hellenes regarded **healthy competition** as a virtue and even used a special term for it which is *ΑΜΙΛΛΑ* (AH-meelah). *Αμιλλα* was considered very important in ancient Greece. It was especially one of the core values of the spirit of the ancient Olympic Games along with the «*Νούς υγιής εν σώματι υγιεί*» (“A healthy mind in a healthy body”). The key to that was balance, a harmony between mind and body. And the means of achieving it was through self-discipline, training, and education in a diverse array of fields. The ideal athlete studied at length and trained hard, worked to achieve a moral character, played fairly, and performed his or her best. The athletes had to arrive at the site a month before the games to go through preparation in which they underwent spiritual, moral, and physical training while the judges supervised them. Only after that month of training did the judges decide if they were genuinely qualified to compete. The youth would be challenged to exercise *Αμιλλα* during the games, and athletes exhibiting negative attitudes would be disqualified and even disgraced. It should further be noted that competition occurred in conjunction with religious festivals.

We can also see examples of **healthy competition** in our own church as well. From the biographies of our saints, we learn that St. Basil (329-379 AD) and St. Gregory the Theologian (329-391 AD), two of the Three Hierarchs who are the patron saints of the Greek Letters, were very close and inseparable friends as well as fellow students in the University of Athens in Greece where they were competing with each other exercising *Αμιλλα*. As St. Gregory writes, “We are both competing but not in a manner of each wanting to receive the first prize award for ourselves as individuals but rather to offer it to the other. And each of us was regarding the progress of the other as our own progress”. Going back to ancient Greece, according to Aristotle, “*Αμιλλα* is the tendency or drive of one trying to reach or even surpass the achievements of another person that he/she admires without feeling any *envy* if that person surpasses him/her.” It is a fact that the *Αμιλλα* of the ancient Hellenes greatly influenced many philosophers and even economists like Adam Smith, among others, who introduced the concept of **co-operative competition** in his books *Invisible Hand* and *The wealth of Nations* upon which the modern free-enterprise and monopoly-free economic systems were founded.

From the above, we can glean clues and guidance regarding **healthy** competition. We learn that *envy* is probably the worst enemy of or the greatest obstacle to the virtue of *Αμιλλα* while the main objective is to focus on improving ourselves through the improvement of our competitors too. Thus, using self-observation and being sincere with ourselves, we can now start by using the **Socratic Method** to ask questions of ourselves and then make improvements following the Orthodox Christian teachings of our church:

- During the competition – Am I learning from the other groups performing rather than feeling *envious* of them? Am I focusing on my whole group performing best rather than just myself? Do I feel happy and excited with my own group’s good performance rather than the inferior performance of the other groups? Am I practicing Orthodox Christian fellowship with the other groups and if not why? Am I following the Orthodox Christian youth tenets and if not why?
- After the competition – What did I learn and improve on as far as the Hellenic Heritage and HDF objectives are concerned? Do I feel happy with what I learned and improved on rather than feeling overexcited with the award my group received or extremely upset and disappointed with the medal it didn’t win? Was I able to learn from and share what I know with the other groups? If I didn’t win an award, do I feel too disappointed to participate in HDF again? Did I have fun at the event and if not why? Did I practice Orthodox Christian fellowship with the other groups and if not why? Did I follow the Orthodox Christian youth tenets and if not why?

As Orthodox Christians, we are challenged in HDF as well as in our lives in general to find our way to healthy competition, to achieve the *Αμιλλα*. Because, as Aristotle was teaching, “**Where there is *Αμιλλα*, there is also a true win**”. A true win for all competitors

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