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The Sex Pistols, Nietzsche and the Will of God: Savas Zembillas's Journey from the Profane to the Sacred

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THE SEX PISTOLS, NIETZSCHE AND THE WILL OF GOD

Savas Zembillas's Journey from the Profane to the Sacred

Maybe it was the stately stone building on 79th Street, just around the corner from Fifth Avenue in Manhattan. Or the shoe-tap echo of the marble floors. Or the woman behind the desk, who said Savas Zembillas '79 was in a meeting with "His Eminence" and invited the visitor to have a seat in the foyer next to a silent chapel where gilded icons hung and votive candles flickered.

But somehow it was completely unexpected that in a matter of minutes Zembillas, chancellor of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America, would be chatting about, among other things, his short but happy career as a punk-band front man.

The band: Mick and the Malignants. The set list: covers of the Sex Pistols, the Ramones. The venues: Frat Row and the old Colby Spa in the basement of Roberts Union. At the Spa gig, band members were escorted through an up-on-the-tables crowd by the men's hockey team. Zembillas went on as a rock-and-roll lounge lizard, recalled drummer Robert Noyes '82, and finished in fatigues as an urban punk guerrilla. "It was really a peak experience," Zembillas said. "Our tactic was to treat every song like the last song. Jump up and down like a madman, that sort of thing. It was almost shamanistic."

Not so his new front-man job, as the Greek Orthodox chancellor hand-picked last year by Archbishop Demetrios, with whom he had just met upstairs in the church's stately headquarters down the street from the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Seated at a table in the church library, Zembillas, 42, spoke of his time in Greek Orthodox monasteries and his responsibilities as a parish priest in Long Island and as overseer of more than 500 parishes across the country. He wore black robes and the traditional full beard of a Greek Orthodox clergyman. And without a trace of embarrassment or irony, he noted that the Malignants always kicked off their shows with the same tune: "We did a punked-up kind of Who version of 'The Kids are Alright.'"

From gifted actor to punk rocker to ascetic Greek Orthodox

monk to prominent ecclesiastic, Zembillas has followed a twisting, turning path that would have defied prediction. Is he an iconoclast or the ultimate traditionalist? Like a hologram, Zembillas can seem like either, depending on the angle from which he is viewed. "He's an enigma, wrapped in a riddle, wrapped in a beard, wrapped in a robe," said Robert Lizza '79, a Boston lawyer and one of Zembillas's closest Colby friends.

Zembillas broke away from the pack early, leaving inner-city Gary, Ind., where his parents, Greek immigrants, ran a corner grocery store. Gary was—and is—ranked among the most dangerous cities in America, and Gold Coast Finer Foods was held up three or four times a year by robbers undeterred by the pistol in Zembillas's father's belt. But holdups went with the turf as did the expectation that Savas Zembillas and his three brothers would pitch in at the store. "It was every day in the summer," Zembillas said. "It was every night after school."

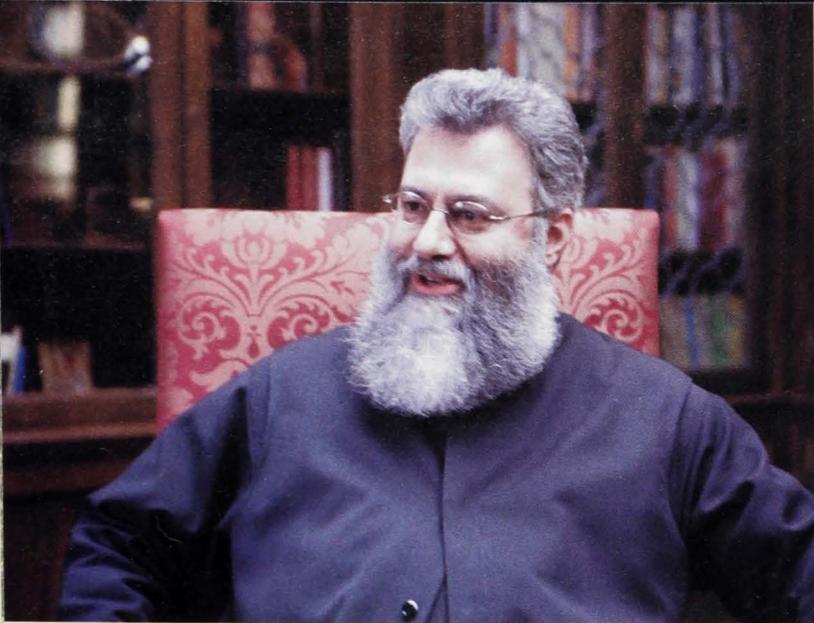
Until college loomed and Zembillas planned his escape.

"I really picked Colby to get away from the grocery store because I knew—I'd been accepted at Notre Dame and closer schools—if I was close enough, I would have been expected to come home for weekends," Zembillas said. "So I just kind of put a compass on a map and I would only consider schools a thousand miles away."

Colby fit the geographic and academic bill and Zembillas came to Mayflower Hill. His blue-collar background hadn't prepared him for things like Eastern prep-school old-boy networks, and he was surprised that some first-year students actually had met before. But if some aspects of Colby were new to Zembillas, some aspects of Zembillas were startling to Colby.

"I consider myself sort of a regular guy," said Lizza, Zembillas's first roommate. "You know how it is. You don't want to stand out too much. I'm coming up from the pub in town, it's like eleven o'clock at night. My room's in basement Woodman.

By Gerry Boyle '78



BRIAN SPEER

Father Savas Zembillas, Chancellor of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America, in the library of the church's Manhattan offices.

I look in my window. Anybody who's standing waiting for the Jitney can look right in. And he's in there. He's wearing this robe. He always wore a robe. Usually you wear your gym shorts. He's wearing a robe. He's got his headphones on. And he's doing 'the Bump' with the closet door. I thought, 'I gotta get a new roommate.'

Instead Lizza came to admire Zembillas tremendously. He wasn't alone.

While his parents expected him to choose one of two career paths—doctor or lawyer—Zembillas plunged into the world of art and literature at Colby. In his first year he landed the lead in *Barefoot in the Park* (the Robert Redford character, he points out) and the lead in *The Glass Menagerie*. In *Jesus Christ Superstar* Zembillas played the part of Pontius Pilate. "If I had to list the ten best students I've ever had, he would be one of them," said Richard Sewell, adjunct associate professor of theater and dance. "An absolutely truthful ability to zero in on the emotional states of whatever role he was playing. There was never a 'fakey' moment in anything he ever did on stage. . . . That's something that can happen fairly often with a young performer, but usually it's not coupled with the ability to project that, to make it happen for an audience at a distance. He had both."

While Sewell said he is chary to encourage student actors to attempt to go pro, he made an exception in Zembillas's case. "I really felt the potential was there," he said.

And the potential to become a monk and priest? That lurked deeper beneath the surface.

Zembillas had some experience as a counselor at Colby, serving as head resident to the flock in the Men's Quad, "kind of a big brother to anyone who needed the help," recalled Noyes, the Malignants' drummer, who lived in the Quad as a freshman. Zembillas spoke Greek at home and served as a Greek Orthodox altar boy and reader. But there

were no Greek Orthodox communities near Waterville, and Zembillas was looking for a break with his Greek past. Early on at Colby he took a philosophy course and was first exposed to rational bases for the existence of God. "I hadn't realized in my days as a Midwest kid that there were such things as arguments for the existence of God and that they're not really good," he said. "And so that whole experience was really corrosive to my faith."

But only temporarily.

Zembillas was an inquisitive student, given to folding so many sources into a single question that classmates recall that Ed Kenney, the late professor of English, once, in jest, called him "an argument against a liberal arts education." In Foss dining hall Zembillas led hours-long discussions of everything from R&B to foreign policy. By his senior year, Zembillas had been drawn back to Greek Orthodox religion, not from the approach of rational argument but from the position that religion is a compulsive force, something that, in all traditions, has changed the direction of people's lives. Zembillas became fascinated by "the literature of religious experience" and, after graduation, continued reading.

He was in Boston then, working as principal roaster for The Coffee Connection in Harvard Square, singing with a New Wave band called La Peste. When he had time off he studied St. Basil, St. John of Damascus, Maximus the Confessor—the great thinkers of Eastern tradition. Meanwhile, Ronald Reagan was preaching the doctrine of winnable nuclear war. To Zembillas it was an apocalyptic time, while the spiritual world beckoned through the words of early Christian monks. "I decided I had to make a radical break. I distributed all my clothes and records and books and all that stuff and just left with a one-way ticket to Mount Athos, the holy mountain."

Zembillas's intention was to stay there, on a rugged peninsula in northern Greece dotted by some 20 monasteries. And he did, sleeping on planks set on sawhorses, spending at least eight hours each day in church, 17 hours on feast days. He knows his Colby friends thought the monk thing was "the Savas flavor of the month."

"I thought he'd be back in three months," Lizza said. "He didn't come back. He didn't come back. He didn't come back. . . ."

The monks let the young American stay for a couple of months, a stint marked by this exchange: "One monk asked me if I'd made any intellectual errors in my life," Zembillas said. "I asked him what he meant by that. It was a little chapel, three in the morning. There were olive-oil lamps and he's got a beard down to his waist and I'm sitting on a stool and it's freezing and he's whispering, asking me if I've made any intellectual mistakes. And I said, 'What do you mean by that?' He said, 'Have you read any Freud or Marx or Nietzsche? Have you listened to the Beatles?' I was still mourning for John Lennon because he'd just been shot. Just to mention his name would make me cry. I said, 'Well, I'm willing to discuss those ideas but I'm not going to confess that it was a sin to have read them.' He said, 'Well, you have a lot to learn, young man.' I said, 'Well, not from you.'"

A Most Soul-Edifying Discovery

For 10 years, including seven spent in doctoral study at Oxford University, Father Savas Zembillas pored over the letters of two monks who lived outside of Gaza in the early 500s. The letters had gone undiscovered for 1,200 years before a manuscript was found in the library of a Greek monastery. The subjects of the letters range from the mundane—discussion of a sick cow—to complex theological matters.

Some 100 copies were published in 1816 in Venice, but it was thought that only four survived: "One in Paris,

one in the Vatican, one in Venice and one on Mount Athos [in Greece]," Zembillas said in New York this spring. Zembillas had never seen the actual letters: at Oxford he worked with microfiche.

In November Zembillas was named chancellor of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America. He reported to work at the archdiocese offices in Manhattan.

"The first day I asked if there was a library, and they gave me a key to the library upstairs." He found coffee-table books. Gift books. But as he browsed the

shelves, Zembillas paused. "There is this brown leather book that says, in Greek, 'Nicodemus of the Mountain: The most soul-edifying book. Venice 1816.' I thought, this can't be. There's only four of these. And it's in the middle of this bunch of stuff. I took it down and I looked at it and it's a first edition. . . . No one would have recognized it."

The fifth known copy of the letters of Nicodemus now resides on the bookshelf in Zembillas's office. "I classify certain encounters," he said, "under the miraculous."

Orthodoxy East and West

The separation of Christians in the East and West crystallized with the schism of 1054, when Patriarch Michael Cerularius of the church of Constantinople and an equally uncompromising Pope Leo IX of the church of Rome excommunicated each other. While 1054 is the symbolic date of the separation, the division was six centuries in the making and led to the infamous sacking of Constantinople by Western Crusaders in 1204.

The division of the churches is rooted in cultural and geopolitical as well as theological differences. Culturally, the split between Western Christianity (Roman Catholicism and Protestantism) and Eastern Orthodoxy perpetuates the Roman Empire's division into a Western half, in which Latin was the dominant language, and an Eastern half, in which Greek was dominant among literate people.

In the West theology became largely the province of priests. In the East a tradition of lay theologians continued. Romans emphasized redemption of sinners; Greeks emphasized deification of humanity. The two factions disagreed about the wording and intent of the Nicene Creed.

Today the beauty and richness of its ceremonial worship is a striking characteristic of Eastern Orthodoxy. In Orthodoxy, images, rather than text, express theological ideas. Aesthetics—the priest's chant, gilded icons, the aroma of incense—are extremely important.

So from there Zembillas made his way back. First stop was a monastery in Patmos, Greece (where a monk was devastated to learn Lennon had been killed), then on to a Greek Orthodox community in Oxford, England. Zembillas mixed cement and read for several months before leaders there advised that he should go on to get an advanced degree. He did, at Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology in Brookline, Mass. While Zembillas said he wanted only a limited degree, he went well beyond that. "There was a need for parish priests that was impressed upon me, and I kind of acknowledged the need and succumbed to the pressure," he said.

Zembillas spent seven years in Oxford, including two years as a deacon, the first step toward priesthood. While Greek Orthodox priests can marry, they must remain celibate if they are unmarried at the time of ordination. In 1995 Zembillas, then single, was ordained a priest and assigned to a parish in Kalamazoo, Mich. Two years later, he moved to a parish in Merrick, N.Y., on Long Island. All those years after Mick and the Malignants and *The Glass Menagerie*, Zembillas once again found himself at center stage.

"It isn't the script I would have written for my life," he admitted. "I think for all my performing background, I really felt rather reticent about being a community leader, the shepherd of a flock. It really felt like too big a thing for me."

But Zembillas has grown into the role. As in years past, he speaks with quiet passion of the tenets of the Greek Orthodox faith and its emphasis on leading a life "transparent" to God's divine purpose, its rejection of any polarization of body and spirit. But Zembillas's duties go beyond abstract theological matters. He blesses babies, performs weddings. He delivers eulogies at funerals and sermons in both English and Greek. He blessed 170 homes in January and February. "A typical Sunday morning service for me is three and a half hours. I mean, people can drift in toward the end if they like, but I'm up there chanting for three and a half hours. And in Holy Week, the week leading up to Easter, the deeper you get into the week the more demanding the services become. I mean, Holy Friday—you're just in church from morning to night. Till late at night."

And then last year the new archbishop looked around for a chancellor for the 1.5 million-member church and chose Zembillas. He was surprised; friends from his past are not. "He was going to be great at whatever he did," said Steve Kirstein '80, keyboard player in the Malignants and now an Internet marketing manager.

The new administration was put in place at a time of contention in the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America. The previous leader of the church in America, Archbishop Spyridon, was ousted amid charges that he was autocratic and didn't understand Greek Orthodox culture in America. Archbishop Demetrios—and his chancellor, Zembillas—represent a new Greek

Orthodox Church of America. Kinder, gentler and, in Zembillas's case, well loved.

"Is no words to express how the whole parish feels about Father Savas," said Peter Loucas, a service station owner and president of St. Demetrios parish in Merrick. "Getting his new post in the Archdiocese, it is heartbreaking for everyone."

Loucas said it was time for Father Savas to move on because he's both educated and gifted. At St. Demetrios, Zembillas is credited with increasing the number of families in the parish from 260 to 320. Loucas also pointed out that Zembillas has donated his time to the parish for the past six months, a gesture that recently drew the attention of the Greek-American media. "He's loved by all the kids and everybody," Loucas said. "Old and young. Unfortunately we're going to lose him."

But not yet.

As devoted to his parishioners as they are to him, Zembillas has not yet picked his successor. So he commutes daily from Long Island into Manhattan, juggling his chancellor duties and his parish job. His archdiocese position involves hours of meetings, public appearances—he was interviewed recently on WNBC in New York—and other obligations. During the interview for this article, Zembillas's cell phone rang several times. He answered, saying he could not be disturbed. Later he learned that the consul general of Cyprus had dropped by to pay him a visit.

With his archdiocese day done, Zembillas drives back to Long Island where the parish duties await. "The youth groups, the philanthropic societies, the Greek language school, the catechetical school," Zembillas recited. "It's a seven-day thing."

"Like the store?" he was asked.

"Exactly."

It seems there are some traditions that cannot be escaped by drawing a circle on a map with a compass, nor should they be. "I remember what I wanted and I wonder how I ended up where I am," Zembillas said. "But I'm of the tradition that believes it's God's will. And so I bow my neck to it." ❖



Savas Zembillas, left, as lead singer with Mick and the Malignants, a popular campus band in the late 1970s.