

**Reverend Father Joseph J. Tzougros, Economos**  
**Pastor of the Assumption Greek Orthodox Church of Madison, Wisconsin**

**EARLY YEARS**

Joseph John Tzougros was born in the Bronx, N.Y., the eldest of the three children of George and Anthoula Tzougros. Joseph and his two sisters, Ann and Penelope, grew up in Queens Village, N.Y. His father, who emigrated from Crete as a young boy, was a licensed Professional Electrical Engineer in charge of the Power Department for the New York City Subway system; he was an Archon and the President of the Parish Council. His mother, a native of Lynn, Massachusetts, was active both locally and nationally with the Philoptochos, and was instrumental in establishing the Sunday School program at their family/s parish of Saint Demetrios in Jamaica, N.Y.

He joined the church choir at the age of ten and at the age of 18 led the choir for his very first time at the ordination of Fr. Stamatios Ganiaris. Following the service, Archbishop Michael thanked him, and later at the reception told the congregation that he believed that Joseph would be a priest someday. Incidentally, singing in Joseph's junior choir was the young beauty Vasiliki Katsigris. Besides the choir, he was very active in GOYA, holding all offices, playing softball, bowling in tournaments, and meeting with the GOYANs of other churches. He and the choir marched in many Greek Independence Day parades.

He graduated Andrew Jackson High School and attended New York City Community College earning an Associate in Applied Science degree. Next, he enrolled in New York University (NYU). While at NYU, he was a member and officer of the Delphi Hellenic Society. All the colleges in NYC had Greek Clubs that met with each other regularly, held dances on their college campuses, and even bigger dances at prestigious New York hotels with prominent Greek bands of the day. During this time, he and Vasiliki, a member of the Artemis Club of Hunter College, began dating.

**SOLDIER BOY**

Joseph's University education was put on hold thanks to the US Army. He was drafted and following basic training was shipped overseas expecting to fight in the war in Lebanon. At the very last minute his ship was diverted to Germany, where he spent 81 months as a Fire Direction Control Coordinator... plotting where the shells from the 8 inch Howitzer guns would land. He led the children's chorus for the Christmas program, and was a grade school substitute teacher for the servicemen's children. One day, during army maneuvers, he and his men helped tow a large Army vehicle out of a mud hole. The "stuck" driver? Elvis Presley.

To pass the time while in the Army, he and six friends formed a rock and roll band called the "Rock-n-Kings" featuring Joe at the piano. A member of the USO heard them play and asked them to put together a traveling road show. The "Rock-n-Kings" sponsored by the USO, toured Germany playing for servicemen and their families.

## **MARRIED WITH CHILDREN**

On February 10, 1960, Joseph returned home. After 18 months and over 600 letters from Vicki (Prez), they were engaged on February 14<sup>th</sup>, and married on December 4, 1960.

Joseph worked for Hoffman Beverage Company as a Flavor Chemist and at the same time attended NYU College of Engineering and Science, and was back to conducting the choir for St. Demetrios. Father was responsible, along with Jimmy Pappas, for establishing the first Metropolitan area Choir Federation. While in school, he held positions with Corn Products International, Consolidated Edison Co., and worked at Hub Engineering Corp. for his father in law. All this while married and raising a family. In the first 4 years of their marriage, George, Joseph, and Corinna were born.

After eight years of night school classes, Joseph graduated from NYU with a degree of Bachelor of Engineering in Industrial Engineering in 1968. Shortly after graduation, he accepted a position with General Electric Heavy Military in Syracuse, N.Y. as a Quality Control Engineer for the Perimeter Acquisition Radar Anti-Ballistic Missile System. At St. Sophia's Greek Orthodox Church in Syracuse, the family was warmly welcomed by Father Michael Harmand and family. Joseph and Vicki joined the choir and eventually, as the need arose, Joseph was back to directing a church choir.

## **MILWAUKEE**

In April 1973, Joseph accepted a new position with GE Medical in Milwaukee. A major reason for selecting the city was its Orthodox Churches. Upon arrival at the Annunciation Greek Orthodox Church in Milwaukee, the Tzougros family was adopted by "Aunt" Min and "Uncle" Nick Kanavas at a traditional Easter celebration, and felt welcomed by many others from their new church community.

It was not just school and work in the early years. Joseph spent many hours with his family, playing, taking trips, and volunteering in Scouting as a Leader, and along with Vicki, he helped to train other scouting personnel through all levels of the Scouting program. Together, at Annunciation, they taught Sunday School, and worked with the youth. At their Annual Greek Festival, they helped sell "Yiayia's Bread", made gyros and conducted church tours.

In 1970, while in Syracuse, Joseph heard about the new “Priest with Lay Profession” program. Vicki knew then, that it was only a matter of time. When they came to Milwaukee in 1973, Joseph approached Father Angelo Kasemeotes, Proistamenos of Annunciation Church in Milwaukee, and with his help petitioned the Archdiocese. Even Vicki had to write a letter agreeing to support his Ordination. Father Angelo, his spiritual father, Father Constantine Hallick, of Ss. Constantine and Helen, Wauwatosa, and Father Peter Papadimitriou of Kimissis Tis Theotokou Church in Racine all were helpful to Father Joseph making sure that he knew the proper SIRA for various services, etc. Presvytera Mary Kasemeotes did her best to make sure Vicki knew what her position was. On April 20, 1975, Father Joseph was ordained by Bishop TImotheos of Chicago of blessed memory. After two years of on the job training, he elevated Father Joseph to the priesthood on August 20, 1977.

## **MAN IN BLACK**

Father Joseph’s main duties at Annunciation were: working with youth, helping with the Liturgy (including special chapel services for the Sunday School), and performing sacraments. The youth group was very cohesive, and many friendships remain all these many years later with the “teens” successfully married and with children of their own. There were weekly meetings that included religious education and social time, dances, parties and summer camps in Lake Geneva, Green Lake, and winter camps at Phantom Lake. Teens from “Saint Connie’s”, Kimissis in Racine, and Holy Trinity in Fond du Lac were included. In both 1979 and 1980, two busloads of teens and counselors went to the Athenagoras Retreat Center in Cheyenne, Wyoming. Twenty years later Fr. Joe went back with the teens from Assumption, Madison.

At Bishop Iakovos’ request, Father Joseph assisted the Diocese by filling in at various churches as the need arose. He filled in for Fr. Dounelis in Madison and Fr. Koufopoulos in Des Plaines and performed services in several communities including Fond du Lac, Appleton, Dubuque, and throughout Chicago. For nine months, he took care of the Ss. Constantine & Helen parish upon the death of their beloved Fr. Hallick. In 1982, Bishop Iakovos “temporarily” assigned Fr. Joseph to Assumption in Madison. Temporarily – from August 2, 1982 until 2008!

From 1975 to 1995, Father Joe maintained dual careers. He often worked seven days a week with his weekends full of church responsibilities. There were many days when he would leave GE, and attend to a church need. Fortunately, his position in the company, and his understanding superiors, allowed him the freedom to do what needed to be done for his parishioners.

In 1986, Fr. Joseph received the prestigious Gerald L. Phillippe Award from General Electric Medical Systems for the countless hours he devoted to community

service helping to enrich the quality of life through the arts. He was instrumental in the Mayor's Council for the Arts in Waukesha County, a Board Member and Vice Chairman of the Children's Service Society, President of the Executive Board of the Waukesha Symphony, Treasurer of the Rankin Theatre Guild, a member of the financial allocation committee of the Waukesha United Way, as well as being active in General Electric Medical System's Elfun Society and Arts Support Program. All these activities were concurrent with responsibilities as both a manager at General Electric and as an Orthodox Priest for whichever parish he was assigned by the Archdiocese.

In 1983, he and Presvytera were awarded Lifetime Membership to the Carroll Players (Wisconsin's oldest college's theater group). This honor stemmed from their involvement in audience development and their legendary Opening Night cast parties. Many hungry college students were introduced to the wonders of Greek cuisine and offered a literal home away from home. Friendships from these gathering have continued. To this day, Father Joe asks alumni to "sing for their supper" by performing the Carroll Choir's signature song, "Children of the Heavenly Father." You may remember hearing it at one of his children's weddings.

Over the years with General Electric Father Joseph held several positions. He was Quality Control Manager; Programs Manager, Computerized Tomography (CT); Manager, Design, Drafting and Graphic Services; and Manager; Magnetic Resonance (MRI) Shop Operations. He was responsible for the introduction of the first 100 CT systems and the first 500 Magnetic Resonance Systems. His last position at GE was Manager of Union Relations. He had to deal with all sorts of people problems and negotiate contracts. Union members and officials affectionately called him "Father Joe". Without hesitation, every individual who has worked with him has the same comments: "A genuinely good person – honest, sincere, and thoughtful; he never makes excuses, he just does what needs to be done; you can always count on Joe". In 1995, He took early retirement from GE, which now gave him the time to fully concentrate on what head wanted to do since he was 18.

## **MADISON**

Not only did Fr. Joe's assignment to Assumption in Madison fulfill his dream of being the sole priest of an Orthodox Community, but it profoundly affected his family as well. He now has ten wonderful grandchildren thanks to his children marrying the children of parish members Stan and Estelle Skoumbouris and Leonidas and Katherine Fafalios. Fortunately, all the "in laws" were friends even before the children married. George and Maria Tzougros are the parents of Theodore and Naida. Joseph and Helene Tzougros are the parents of Sophia, Alexandra, Eleni, Gabriella, and Joseph. Corinna and Spiro Fafalios are the parents of Vasiliki, Dimitri, and Joseph. The family grew even further when D. Corey Helser, George's college classmate, became

Presvytera's godson and Scott Spevacek, Joseph's high school friend became his godson. Later, both Corey and Scott married members of the Assumption Church as well.

Since Father Joseph's arrival at Assumption, the parish has grown three fold. Our church has undergone many physical changes including: the railings have been removed and the solea and altar have been done in marble, a dividing wall was erected that created a real narthex, more beautiful icons have been added with Father's wholehearted encouragement and support, our Sunday School has been renovated, and the office has been modernized. Due to the February 2002 fire, we now have a ceramic tiled narthex floor and frosted windows.

Our church has plenty to be proud of. With the hard work of generous volunteers, our small kitchen is capable of feeding thousands at Greek Fest and hundreds at our Feast Day meals. Parishioners also serve Greek chicken dinners to the homeless. Our Philoptochos is busy pursuing many philanthropic works. Our Youth is active both socially and charitable. Greek School has been resurrected, and Sunday School continues to grow. All parishioners have the opportunity to learn the tradition of iconography from our own iconographer in residence. We have had the pleasure of watching our teens and youngsters learn and perform in Greek Dance Troupes. Our church newsletter is published on the Web. Our choir is without peer in our diocese, and our Chanters, Altar Boys and Subdeacon continue to selflessly provide their talents enhancing the beauty of our services.

Currently, along with his church duties here in Madison, Father Joseph is the Treasurer of the Orthodox Clergy Syndesmos of Wisconsin, the Treasurer of the Chicago Clergy Syndesmos, and a Clergy representative on the Diocesan Council. He is Treasurer of the University Religious Workers of Madison, and was a founding member of the Orthodox Christian Charities of Wisconsin. He is also an Emergency Room Chaplain at Waukesha Memorial Hospital.

Just last year, as we celebrate the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the founding of our Assumption Parish, Metropolitan Iakovos bestowed the title of Ekonomos upon Father Joseph. AXIOS!!

All of these many years of devotion and accomplishment could not have been attained without the Hand of God, Father Joseph's profound faith, the spiritual guidance of his Metropolitan, and the loving support of his wife, family, clergy, and parishioners.