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Restoring faith

By Julie Zeglen
Star Editor

Rev. Nicolai Buga did not like Northern Liberties when he moved there nine years ago.

"Adjusting to this new life was unexpectedly difficult," said the 62-year-old pastor of Holy Trinity Romanian Orthodox Church, N. American and Brown streets.

"I didn't like the area at all. My wife asked me, 'Why are we here?' because compared to downtown

Bucharest, this was like a bad village."

Buga came from Bucharest, the capital of Romania, where he taught theology and church history at the Orthodox Theological Seminary, to lead Holy Trinity in 2006.

Northern Liberties had been a center for Romanians since the early 1900s when many fled the anti-Orthodox Christianity, Austro-Hungarian-ruled

Romanian provinces of Transylvania and Banat. In the 1960s and '70s, though, crime in the area became so rampant that most of those who had settled there sold their homes for as little as a few thousand dollars and relocated to the Northeast and beyond. (Buga could only name one Romanian family who still remains, on N. Third Street.)

► **Holy Trinity Romanian Orthodox Church in Northern Liberties prepares for its bicentennial while undergoing a massive restoration project.**

Of course, the neighborhood's dramatic turnaround occurred and left the neighborhood as it looks today,

with its brand-new apartment complexes and a commercial stretch on N. Second Street, and those who left can no longer afford to return to live.

A lot has changed in Northern Liberties in even the last nine years, and Buga is happier there now, though his wife, parents and two sons are currently back in Romania.

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JULIE ZEGLEN / STAR PHOTO

Rev. Nicolai Buga, pastor of Holy Trinity Romanian Orthodox Church, N. American and Brown streets, stands amidst the ongoing restoration project. Buga hopes the work will be finished by the church's bicentennial this fall.



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CHURCH

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"I like the people around here," he said. "I like the fact that we have a lot of youngsters around the church, lot of kids, and it's totally different. Unfortunately, it's much too expensive for Romanians to come back. It's impossible. But, who knows. I keep telling my people that this church, we have to preserve for their kids and their grandchildren, because I do hope that one day they will be rich enough to afford a house in such an expensive area and to make use of this wonderful church of theirs."

That church will be the focus of a major celebration this year: its bicentennial. Holy Trinity was constructed from 1815 to 1816 and was designed by William Strickland, a notable architect of the American Greek Revival style who also designed the Second Bank of the United States in Old City. (The church is his oldest surviving work.)

From its construction until the early 20th century, the building, which was previously known as Saint John's Church, served as the worship site for Protestant Episcopalians, and the growing Romanian population worshipped across Brown Street in a still-standing building dubbed the "Banateana Society." The Episcopalians invited the Romanians to share the church for several years until finally, in 1923, they took it over, due to depleted Episcopal membership. Nowadays, Holy Trinity's members travel from Delaware, New Jersey, Maryland and even as far as Washington, D.C. to attend Holy Liturgy in Northern Liberties.

The church is in the midst of a massive restoration

"It is amazing to come in the country of freedom here, and to see such beautiful historical monuments being demolished. I just cannot understand and it's something I cannot accept."

REV. NICOLAI BUGA, PASTOR

project that began with its exterior in 2007 and has since included the interior roof, floor and decorative details. When the floor planks at the front of the church were being ripped up to accommodate the installation of a newly received iconostasis (an icon-decorated wall that divides the nave from the sanctuary), it was discovered that their base was rotting heavily.

"They called me and said, 'Father, we have a surprise,'" Buga recalled with a slight laugh. "A good surprise?' No."

The rainwater that had gotten into the floor had come from leaking in the roof, so the ceiling needed to be replaced. The painted canvas that had been glued to the ceiling was also damaged when decorative plaster fell from the ceiling.

The floor and ceiling have since been replaced, and the decorative plaster molding is currently being preserved. A new HVAC system, oak hardwood flooring, and chandeliers and lamps need to be purchased and installed. The two remaining stained glass windows need restoration, but they are not a priority; there is no money for that, Buga said. The railings of the upper balcony will be redecorated, and

the walls will be repainted in the Byzantine style, as they had been previously.

"It was very vivid, very colorful," he said. "Most art historians were delighted with this style."

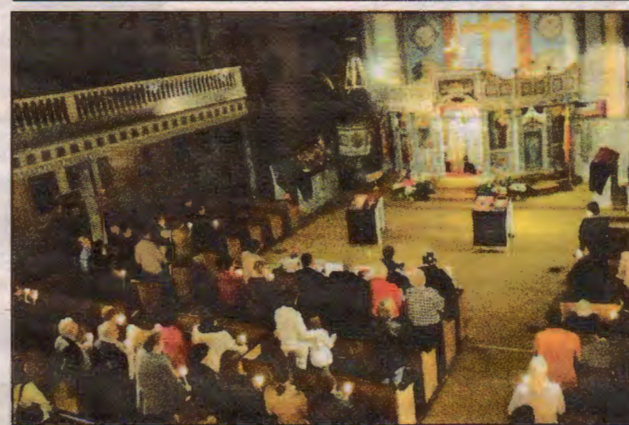
The goal is to finish the restoration by the bicentennial celebration, to be held on Nov. 1.

The church is listed in the National Register of Historic Places, according to longtime Northern Liberties resident Mary Dankanis, who was "deeply involved" in getting it listed in the early 1980s.

The building earned a place on the Register by meeting certain criteria, which are listed on the website of the U.S. Department of Interior: It "represent[ed] the work of a master" (Strickland); it is "associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history" (it was visited by Queen Marie of Romania in 1926 during her tour of the country); and it "represent[s] a significant and distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction" (the Romanian congregation added the wooden steeple with a cross and three bells above the entrance – "truly groundbreaking for its time," Dankanis said).

At the time of its listing, no money was available for the restorations needed even then, Dankanis said in an email.

"When we put it on the National Register, it required a lot of rehabbing," she said. "The roof, for exam-



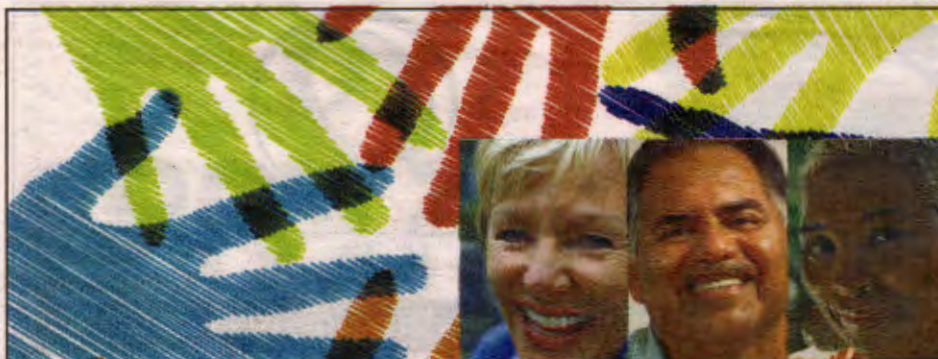
(Top) Holy Trinity Romanian Orthodox Church is listed in the National Register of Historic Places, partly because of its architecture. JULIE ZEGLEN / STAR PHOTO. (Left) The interior of the church. JULIE ZEGLEN / STAR PHOTO. (Bottom) A service in the church before the restoration process began. PHOTO COURTESY OF REV. NICOLAI BUGA.

ple, was leaking and destroying the beautiful ceiling. There was no funding available in 1982 for restoration and it languished for many years."

Buga estimated that costs thus far have reached \$700,000. An additional \$150,000 is needed to complete the restoration work, and \$100,000 is needed for the bicentennial celebration, he said.

After Buga took over, the church received one \$75,000 grant in 2006 from nonprofit Partners for Sacred Places, which was used to restore the building's exterior, but most funds raised thus far have come





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PHOTO COURTESY OF REV. NICOLAI BUGA

Queen Marie of Romania visiting the church in 1926.

CHURCH

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mainly from parishioners.

One parishioner who has contributed both her money and time to the church is Maria Marcella Charles, an 85-year-old New Jersey resident who has been driving to the church, 40 minutes each way, every week since Buga took over nine years ago. Charles is active in assisting the church's Sunday School and in planning church events, but also in coordinating parishioners to do what they can to further the restoration process by donating to the cause.

"My hope is absolutely to see it done and to feel comfortable," she said. "The liturgy in the chapel is not the same like in the big church. And it's not only for us, we want to do it for our children, our grandchildren. ... We want to finish the work, and our possibilities are very small, so dollar by dollar, we're getting together to do it."

Charles hopes, as Buga does, that the project will be finished by the bicentennial celebration.

"That's the goal, and we pray for it," she said. "Believe me, we hope and we pray for it to be finished. ... There's no way to postpone because we did postpone for several years, but because of the money we [were] restricted like that."

The bicentennial celebration will include a consecration service performed by Archbishop Nicolae of Chicago and a number of other impor-

tant priests, as well as a concert featuring Romanian musicians and a picnic with traditional Romanian dishes. ("In the Orthodox church, everything should be done with food," Charles said.) The governor, the mayor, university professors and the general public will be invited to celebrate with parishioners.

When it was pointed out to him that it is remarkable to find a building as old as Holy Trinity in Northern Liberties these days, Buga mentioned the church of his first parish in Moldova which had been built in 1613 and which he was charged with restoring. Even during that time of Communist rule, he said, the state gave the parish money to support the church's restoration.

"You know, my heart is bleeding when I see beautiful old churches in downtown Philadelphia that are just being demolished," he said. "For me, it's incredible. I just cannot believe, how is it possible to demolish a 200-year-old, wonderful building just because that church has no parish in it? ... It is amazing to come in the country of freedom here, and to see such beautiful historical monuments being demolished. I just cannot understand and it's something I cannot accept."

So, the parish keeps rebuilding. ••

The parish of Holy Trinity Romanian Orthodox Church will host a barbecue fundraiser on Sunday, July 19. Location and details to come. To learn more about the church, visit holytrinityphiladelphia.org.

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