

Pioneering Priests: Establishing the Greek Orthodox Faith in America
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The Long Road to Brookline

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Nothing came easily to the early Greek immigrants in America. Most descendants of that pioneering generation can recount stories of the hardships their ancestors endured and the sacrifices they made. The Greek Orthodox Church in America also had its share of early struggles. Perhaps nothing illustrates this better than the efforts to establish a seminary to train priests for service in America. This project was always a top Church priority. A seminary was planned or established on four occasions in four states: Missouri, New York, North Carolina, and Connecticut. It took twenty years from the time of the first discussions to the establishment of a stable institution at Pomfret in 1937. Another decade passed before the seminary was permanently situated at its present location in Brookline, Massachusetts.

The idea of an American seminary occupied the attention of hierarchs Meletios Metaxakis and Athenagoras Spyrou. Each tried to establish a seminary shortly after his arrival in America. The first serious discussion appears to have occurred in the fall of 1918 during the first visit of Meletios, Metropolitan of Athens, to this country. A group of wealthy Greeks pledged over \$100,000 to finance the project, and the Mayor of St. Louis, Missouri, offered to donate land for the seminary if it were located there. Archbishop Athenagoras, in 1932, the year after his arrival in America, initiated plans to open a seminary in Gastonia, North Carolina. Neither plan progressed beyond the discussion stage.

Meletios and Athenagoras, who both served as Ecumenical Patriarch in Constantinople, were more successful in their second attempts. Shortly after Meletios returned to America in 1921, he established St. Athanasios Seminary in Brooklyn. This took place only weeks after the first Clergy-Laity Congress and the incorporation of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of North and South America by the State of New York. Unfortunately, there was not enough money to continue operating St Athanasios, and it closed after two academic years in May 1923. It did, however, have an enduring impact.

The stately mansion at 273 Elm Street in Astoria that had been purchased to house the seminary remained an important part of the Archdiocese for two decades after St. Athanasios closed. It functioned both as a chapel where many priests were ordained and as Archdiocese headquarters. In his autobiography, Father John Gerotheou writes in detail about the ordeal of a four-hour exam on July 22, 1925 at Archdiocese headquarters in Astoria. The following month, he made a second trip

to Astoria from his Philadelphia home for his ordination as Deacon. As the Church in America continued to grow, the Archdiocese outgrew this facility. Peter Kourides pointed out that, at the time of the arrival of Archbishop Athenagoras to this country in 1931, “the Archdiocese was...situated in an antiquated frame house in Astoria upon which there were two mortgages totaling \$35,000.00. Its heating facilities were so primitive and inadequate that the Archbishop actually shivered from the cold during the winter.” In 1942, the current home of the Archdiocese was purchased in Manhattan.

The official publication of the Seminary and of the Greek Orthodox Church in America was *The Church Herald*, edited by Professor Michael Galanos. It was the first such publication issued by the Archdiocese. It, too, was discontinued due to a lack of funding. *The Church Herald* was a forerunner to the *Orthodox Observer*, which was established in 1934.

Because St. Athanasios Seminary was only in existence for two years, no students completed the three-year course and graduated from the seminary. It did, however, confer two honorary degrees. On May 27, 1923, Archbishop Alexander conferred Doctor of Divinity (*Honoris Causa*) degrees upon New York City Episcopalian ministers Rev. Henry V. B. Darlington and Rev. Thomas J. Lacey for their work on behalf of the Greek Orthodox Church in America. These were the first such degrees issued by the Greek Orthodox Church in America.

It was the students who began their training at St. Athanasios who are the Seminary’s legacy. Thalís Demetriades, Aristides Palaynes, Haralambos Skoufis, and George Evrotas, who had been an English-language student instructor at the Seminary, were among those who completed their studies at non-Orthodox American seminaries. All were ordained as priests and went on to serve parishes throughout the Archdiocese for decades. Father Demetriades served in Portland, New Orleans, Tulsa, and Mobile; Father Palaynes at Sioux City, Perth Amboy and Asbury Park; Father Skoufis at Nashville, Duluth, Sacramento, Stockton, Cincinnati, and Fresno; and Father Evrotas at Dayton, Kansas City, Joliet, Peoria, Omaha, Racine, Waukegan, and Des Moines. Athanasios Theodorides, the Seminary’s student instructor of Byzantine music, did not become a priest, but he continued to teach Greek and direct choirs for a half century in Baltimore and elsewhere. Another student, Michael Mikelis, never entered the priesthood, but he achieved local celebrity for the Bible quotations that adorned the walls and menus of his Long Island City eatery, the Central Lunch Room for Ladies and Gentlemen.

It was the second attempt by Archbishop Athenagoras to establish a seminary that led to the foundation of Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology in Pomfret, Connecticut, in September 1937. Here at last was created the enduring institution of which so many had dreamed. Now in its 77th year, situated on a beautiful campus in Brookline, Massachusetts, Holy Cross has graduated thousands, many of whom have been ordained and others who have served the Archdiocese and the faith in other capacities.