

Pioneering Priests: Establishing the Greek Orthodox Faith in America

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This article first appeared in the October 2014 issue of the Orthodox Observer, the official publication of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America.

**A Bold Initiative: Recruiting Seminary Students from Abroad
After World War II**

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The Greek Orthodox Church has always been resourceful in meeting the many challenges it faces in America. In July 1946, Bishop Athenagoras Cavadas (1885-1962), Dean of the Holy Cross Theological Seminary, traveled to war-ravaged Greece to recruit much-needed students for the fledgling Pomfret, Connecticut school. Although the Church has continued to invite students from abroad for training, those who came in 1946 constituted the first and largest group.

Bishop Athenagoras was educated at the University of Athens and at Oxford University. His accomplishments are detailed in Father George Poulos's fine biography, *Footsteps in the Sea*. Bishop Athenagoras served the Church in America in many capacities. He was Dean of the Annunciation Cathedral in Boston, Chancellor of the Archdiocese, founding editor of the *Orthodox Observer*, and *locum tenens* of the Archdiocese after the 1948 election of Archbishop Athenagoras Spyrou as Ecumenical Patriarch. After almost thirty years in America, Bishop Athenagoras was elected to higher office and transferred to London, where he passed away in 1962.

The shortage of priests had been a chronic problem for the Church in America. With the ever-increasing number of parishes, it was difficult for the Archdiocese to provide enough priests to serve during Great Lent, Holy Week, and other major Feast Days. At first, the Church relied on priests who had been ordained overseas. By the early 20th century it became clear there was also a need for priests who were fluent in English and familiar with American conditions and customs.

The establishment of the Holy Cross Theological Seminary in Pomfret was the third attempt to meet that need by creating a Greek Orthodox seminary in America. St. Athanasios Seminary in Astoria, New York and St. Stephanos in Gastonia, North Carolina were short-lived. During the interim, priests were trained at American seminaries established by other denominations. In the early 1930's, eight promising young Americans were sent abroad for training at the University of Athens and the Patriarchal Seminary at Halki.

Holy Cross Theological Seminary had an excellent start. Twelve of the fifteen students who enrolled in the inaugural 1937 class completed the course of study and graduated on time in 1942. The war in Europe, however, forced the school to face difficult choices. Ocean liners were being converted for war duty, and transatlantic

shipping lanes were being disrupted. It was no longer possible to send Holy Cross students abroad to complete their studies. The Seminary was expanded from a two-year preparatory course to a full five-year curriculum. Enrollment remained strong, but graduation rates plummeted. The war effort siphoned off young men, with only four members of the original class of 23 graduating in 1945. By 1946, less than 30% of the 200 students who enrolled had completed their course of study.

When wartime hostilities finally ended, the indefatigable Bishop Athenagoras Cavadas adopted a new strategy. The Church again looked overseas, but instead of relying primarily on priests trained abroad, he chose to recruit young students for his seminary. In July 1946 Bishop Cavadas departed for Greece. In six weeks, he recruited nearly 30 students. From November 1946 to March 1947, the Archdiocese paid for over two dozen of these young men to come to America. For some, the journey was harrowing. Eleven students sailed from Greece on a ship that was wrecked near Marseilles, France. A French navy destroyer rescued survivors, who then boarded the SS *Netherlands Victory*, a converted freighter that brought them to Baltimore. The *Netherlands Victory* was a Victory Ship, a class of vessels produced in the mid-1940's by the hundreds for the U.S. war effort.

Although not all the students from Greece completed their studies, their graduation rate was high, and they finished the course work much faster than earlier enrollees. Their arrival could not have come at a better time for the Church. As American servicemen were discharged from the military and began to start families, priests were needed to guide parishes and perform the increasing number of weddings and baptisms.

The timing also benefited the Greek students, who had suffered through years of war. Greece entered World War II in 1940, more than a year before America. Germans invaded in 1941. The forces occupying the mainland withdrew in late 1944, but there was no respite. Greece was consumed by a civil war that raged until 1949. America would provide a safe haven for these young men to devote themselves to their studies.

Among the 1946 recruits were many who would serve the Church with distinction. Some would continue to minister to the faithful into the 21st century. Among these impressive, pioneer postwar students were: Fr. Dennis Michelis, who served the St. Demetrios parish in Warren, Ohio for 48 years from 1955 until 2003; Fr. Philemon Payiatis who served the Annunciation parish in Dayton, Ohio from 1950 to 1975; Fr. Spyridon Mourkis, serving St. George in Hyannis-Centerville, Massachusetts from 1946 to 1991; Fr. Constantine Bebis, priest at the St. George parish in New Bedford, Massachusetts from 1953 to 2011; Fr. Constantine S. Mitsos, who served the Holy Trinity-St. Nicholas parish in Cincinnati, Ohio from 1959 to 1990; and Fr. Dr. Demetrios J. Constantelos, who served many parishes and was a distinguished professor of history and religious studies at The Richard Stockton College of New Jersey.