

Pioneering Priests: Establishing the Greek Orthodox Faith in America

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The Founding of Saint Athanasios Seminary

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The Greek Orthodox Church in America grew in stages. First came the immigrants. They arrived with few material goods but with much more in intangibles: their language, customs, food, dance, song, and perhaps what they treasured most, their faith. Immigrants formed communities, parishes were organized, and priests were needed. When there were few churches and priests, immigrants from areas without churches traveled far to secure the services of a priest or waited to bring a priest to their home. It required considerable time and money to conduct baptisms, weddings, and funerals or to celebrate major Feast Days.

Meletios Metaxakis, Metropolitan of Athens (1871-1935), arrived in New York in August 1918 with Bishop Alexander of Rodostolou and others. On August 4, just before his departure, the Holy Synod of Greece established the Archdiocese of America as an episcopate of the Autocephalous Church of Greece. Although he was only in the U.S. for three months, Metropolitan Meletios realized that a seminary was needed to train priests for the challenges confronting the church in the Diaspora.

Of the many reasons for establishing a theological training center in America, the most pressing was the sheer number of parishes. Parishes were being established faster than priests were arriving as immigrants. Most of the priests serving in the U.S. were not young, and it was feared that age might limit their activities and ability to communicate with their new flocks, mostly made up of young men. It was also important to have priests who were fluent in English as well as Greek. For the church, the Diaspora represented a special opportunity to become firmly established on a new continent. Not only was it important to keep the immigrant faithful within the church, it was also important to minister to the generation born in America.

With the opportunity came new challenges. In Greece, the Greek Orthodox Church was preeminent. In Asia Minor, although Christians were in the minority, the Greek Orthodox Church had been the dominant Christian faith. In North America, however, there were many other well-established Christian churches. For some immigrants who wished to “become American,” conversion seemed a prudent option. Also, when Greek Orthodox men married non-Greek women, many of these men converted. This was perhaps inevitable, since—at the time—the Church focused primarily on those born into the faith.

Meletios Metaxakis, now Archbishop, made a second trip to America in March 1921 and stayed for almost nine months. During this eventful trip, he officiated at the dedication of Saint Athanasios Greek Orthodox Theological Seminary. On November 7, 1921, *The New York Times* reported:

Meletios Metaxakis, Archbishop of Athens, officiated yesterday afternoon at the dedicatory exercises of the first seminary for the training of priests of the Greek Orthodox Church in this country. The ceremony took place in the auditorium of the 23rd St. [now McBurney] YMCA, 23rd St. & 7th Ave. Until funds can be obtained for the construction of a building for the theological school, which will be called the Greek Seminary of St. Athanasius [sic], classes which begin today, will be conducted in a room lent for the purpose by the Central Branch of the YMCA in Brooklyn. Greek business men of this country have contributed toward the building fund and former Premier [Eleftherios] Venizelos gave \$1,000 toward the fund, but most of the money for the upkeep of the seminary for the next few years will be contributed by the priesthood of the Greek Orthodox Church in America. After the dedicatory services Archbishop Meletios told the audience that on account of a lack of such an institution in this country the Greek Orthodox Church in America has had to import its young priests from Greece. This has been unsatisfactory he said, because the educational requirements for the priesthood are not so high in Greece as they are in America. Nine students have been enrolled for the seminary.

The first Greek Orthodox theological seminary in America was off to an auspicious and well-publicized start. Facilities were secured, a fine faculty was assembled, and students were enrolled. From the beginning, however, there were pressing financial problems. The large Venizelos donation was newsworthy but was only matched by three others, two of whom were Archbishop Meletios and Bishop Alexander. The burden of maintaining the seminary fell disproportionately on the shoulders of the priests, who did not have large incomes. Nonetheless this was an historic moment in the history of the Church in America, and ambitious plans were being developed.

On November 25, while Archbishop Meletios was in the U.S., he was elected to the position of Ecumenical Patriarch. At a dinner given in his honor by the clergy of the Episcopal Church in Philadelphia, Patriarch-Elect Meletios announced he was considering the establishment of another theological seminary for Greek Orthodox priests in their city. This plan was never realized. The Patriarch-Elect soon left America, never to return.

The difficult work of developing and maintaining Saint Athanasios Seminary fell upon the Church in America. In 1923 Archbishop Alexander said, "It is to this school that the Greek Church in America is looking for the future clergy who are to carry on its work in America. . . . This is the most important venture the Greek Church has undertaken."