

"I AM THE VINE,...

...YE ARE THE BRANCHES"

THE GRAPEVINE

Vignettes of Seminary Life



Saint Gregory Palamas
Monastery in winter

The Feast of Saint Gregory Palamas.

The Patronal Feast of the Saint Gregory Palamas Monastery, held on the second Sunday of Great Lent, was especially joyous this year thanks to the presence of Bishop Maximus of Pelagonia.

On the eve of the Feast, Bishop Auxentios of Etna and Portland, the co-founder and Rector of the Saint Photios Orthodox Theological Seminary, read a sermon delivered by the late and ever-memorable Metropolitan Chrysostomos of Etna, his spiritual Father and the principal founder of the Seminary. This sermon delves deeply into the teachings of Saint Gregory Palamas, who, as a champion of the Hesychastic tradition

and an expounder of the distinction between the Essence and the Energies of God, is one of the Church's foremost teachers of the theology of deification.

On the Feast Day itself, Bishop Maximus of Pelagonia, a Visiting Instructor at the Seminary, gave a sermon that used the life of Saint Gregory as a premier example of how the Grace of God works in each of our lives. The interweaving historical and biographical aspects of Saint Gregory's pursuit of the acquisition of the virtues made the working of God's Grace clearly evident in his life, a life dedicated to God and to the service of His Church. Simply put, Saint Gregory lived the process of deification. Bishop Maximus

exhorted all in attendance—clergymen, monastics, and laymen—to apply the theological teachings *and* the practical example of Saint Gregory to their own lives.

The teaching of deification, which the Orthodox Church alone offers the world, not only gives us our ultimate goal but also explains how its attainment is possible. But it is not enough to have this merely as an intellectual or scholarly pursuit. I have deep appreciation for Metropolitan Chrysostomos’s sermon, which conveys the profundity of Orthodox theology as articulated by Saint Gregory Palamas. It is so rich, however, that I fear much of it escapes me. For this reason, I am especially grateful to the Brotherhood of Saint Gregory Palamas Monastery, which, along with the Sisterhood of the nearby Convent of Saint Elizabeth the Grand Duchess of Russia, form the nucleus of the faculty, administration, and staff of the Seminary. They are a daily and tangible example to the Seminary students of a life dedicated to living theology. This makes all the difference in the world.

It brings me great joy to share both sermons with you in this issue of *The Grapevine*. Metropolitan Chrysostomos’s sermon is reproduced below, while an audio recording of Bishop Maximus’s sermon can be found on the Seminary’s YouTube channel at spots.edu/bmsermon.

Alexei Bushunow, Communications
and Development Director

In Honor of Saint Gregory Palamas.

The following sermon by Metropolitan Chrysostomos of Etna (1943–2019) was originally delivered in Athens on the Second Sunday of Great Lent, the Feast Day of Saint Gregory Palamas, in 1999, and translated from the Greek by Bishop Auxentios of Etna and Portland.

Your Eminence, Metropolitan Kyprianos [I of Oropos and Phyle (1935–2013)], our beloved Father in Christ; Your Graces; Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

At the request of our Metropolitan and Father, out of obedience, and asking the intercession of the Saint, the blessing of His Eminence, and your forgiveness for my shortcomings and the obvious lack of eloquence in my short homily, I would like to say a few simple words about the basic teachings of Saint Gregory Palamas (1296–1359), Archbishop of Thessalonica.

This second Sunday of the Great Fast and, as well, our Monastery in California—which is a dependency of the Holy Monastery of Saints Cyprian and Justina—are dedicated to the memory of Saint Gregory Palamas, who, as we sing in his *Apolytikion*, was a great “Teacher” of the Church, a “defender of theologians,” and a “luminary of Orthodoxy.” That is to say, Saint Gregory Palamas, by his life and with his teachings, expresses the catholic and oecumenical truth of Christianity and guides us to the criterion of the Faith, the Orthodox Church. During his life in this world, he tried to preserve the authenticity and purity of the words of the Holy Fathers, just as he protects us now, from the other world, in our humble but indispensable efforts in our own age to safeguard the legacy of the Fathers of the Church. Today, some six hundred forty years after his repose, we are still illuminated in our Orthodox Faith by the beauty of this great and important example of those enlightened men and women whom, by Grace, Christ unites to Himself, His light thus shining in their persons. And, indeed, in the *Synaxarion* for the Feast of Saint Gregory Palamas, we read that, from the very day of his Ordination, the Divine Light of the Savior continually showed forth on his countenance.

I am not an accomplished theologian, and I do not have the necessary gifts to set forth for you the profound spiritual essence of the teachings of Saint Gregory Palamas. This gift from on high you may see in the work and daily life of our Metropolitan; and, to be sure, a number of the

events in the life of Saint Gregory Palamas are similar to those in the life of our spiritual Father (I could also, incidentally, draw parallels between the gifts of the Saint and those which I see in the Metropolitan), since God's elect—while each individual may, in his path toward deification by Grace [θεοποίησις (*theopoiēsis*)], remain true to the idiosyncrasies of his character or personality—draw their identity from the universal and archetypal Person of Christ, Who renders us, when He unites us by His love to His Body, authentic, genuine persons through the restoration of the image of God in our sinful hearts.

Therefore, once again because of my lack of gifts and theological knowledge, I will simply describe that which I do not actually know and that in which I am inexperienced. I do not believe that we have anything to lose by my poor words, since, first, I am speaking with the blessing and by the command of my spiritual Father, the Metropolitan (that is, out of obedience); and second, because I do not think that the mere description of spiritual things is without significance all together. In truth, even the Holy Scriptures, despite errors in our thinking in this regard produced by the influence of Protestant theology on the contemporary teachings of our Holy Church, do not *contain* the Glory of God, but rather—though with the power of the Holy Spirit and in a perfect manner—*describe* the Glory of God, leading us to an encounter with the reality of life in Christ, wherein by Grace the Lord Himself reveals to us His Glory. With the help of God and with the blessing of our spiritual Father, then, perhaps I can, with my few descriptive words about the teachings of Saint Gregory Palamas, bring you to an elementary awareness of the theological treasury of this physician of the soul of man, who, unfortunately, is still not so well known in the contemporary Church, despite the

importance of his teachings for the witness of the Catholic Church of Christ, that is, the Orthodox Church.

By way of introducing my subject, let me say that the teachings of Saint Gregory Palamas constitute *a perfect manifestation* of the catholic, or universal, truth of our Faith. His teachings express the fullness of Christian cosmology, anthropology, and theology (using the precise definition of the word “θεολογία” [*“theologia”*]), and constitute a magnificent solution to the dilemmas of Western philosophy. The wisdom of Saint Gregory Palamas, in fact, is based on profound theological principles: revealed truths that eventually lead us, and clearly so, to the scientific revolution in theoretical physics that began, in many ways, with Albert Einstein (1879–1955) and which, of late, has reached a stage where it theorizes that physical “matter,” the material of the physical world, is what we might call “metaphysical”; that is, that it is comprised not simply of atomic particles, but of elements of immaterial light energy (something which has a clear connection to the teachings of Saint Gregory Palamas, as we shall see). These imperfect theories of theoretical physics demonstrate to us that the Teachers of Orthodoxy live that about which our scientists only speculate (if at times fruitlessly so, at least from a spiritual standpoint); but they also tell us that God, “Who is everywhere present and fills all things,” reveals Himself, on account of His love, even in nature and in the secular efforts of mankind to find basic meaning in the world and to discover the ultimate aim of life. Thus, in the catholic and oecumenical—and I use these words, too, with their literal and ecclesiastical meaning—teaching of Saint Gregory Palamas, we discover a perfect statement of the universality of Orthodoxy.

Before examining briefly the specific teachings of Saint Gregory, I must point out two basic things.

First, Saint Gregory Palamas was not just an educated Teacher of the Church who spoke in theoretical terms about the Divine revelation and vision of God through the treatment of the ills of the soul of man. He was not just a great philosopher who expressed the doctrines of the Church with singular intellectual precision, as many say today on account of the current rediscovery of the teachings of Saint Gregory Palamas in the realm of academic theology. He was, of course, literate and educated; in fact, he was a genius with incredible academic skills. When I read him through the eyes of a former psychologist, I put him on the level of Einstein, to whom I earlier referred. Saint Gregory was, in my humble opinion, the most brilliant man of his age. But knowledge is one thing, while wisdom is another, the latter coming forth solely from experience in the spiritual life and through a revealed knowledge of God. Saint Gregory Palamas did not theologize in a theoretical way, with the goal of analyzing theological ideas philosophically. Quite the contrary. Just as the Fathers of the Church “baptized” Classical Greek philosophy in order to preach the ineffable truth of Christianity in the language of philosophy (thus making philosophy the slave of Christianity, and not Christianity the slave of philosophy, as happened in Scholastic philosophy in the West, after the tragic breaking-away of the Papists from the Orthodox Church), so Saint Gregory “baptized” his educational accomplishments, making them a slave of the Church. The Divine Palamas, again, did not theologize in an academic sense, but from within his spiritual experience; that is, from within the living experience of the Church.

This fact is exceedingly important, since it allows us to see in a correct way, not only the teachings of Saint Gregory Palamas, but the general significance of education in the Church. Education,



Metropolitan Chrysostomos of Etna
as a university professor

when it adorns our exposition of the Christian Faith, is extremely important for the Christian community. The highly-educated Fathers of the Church wrote magnificently about theology. But the spiritual experience which they describe in their words is precisely the same experience as that of wholly illiterate Fathers and Saints of the Church. We thus have the examples of many Saints and holy personages in the Church who, rich in wisdom but lacking literary gifts, transmitted their wisdom to us through spiritual disciples more gifted in letters. Indeed, our Lord Himself, the Source of both Divine and human wisdom, left with us *not a single written word* from His hand. Everything of His life we read in the words of His Divine Disciples. This shows us that in the Church, which is ruled by humility, education does not distinguish one person from another. The man of God is distinguished by his wisdom, which is a gift from God that enlightens both the educated and the uneducated man with the same Divine knowledge. For this reason,



Metropolitan Chrysostomos of Etna
as an Orthodox Hierarch

the educated man of God is not ostentatious in revealing his abilities, unless it is to help the Church or to help some other enlightened Father who does not have the gift of literary expression.

For example, Saint Athanasios the Great (295–373), Patriarch of Alexandria, considered Saint Anthony the Great (251–356), who was wholly illiterate, his teacher. And Saint Anthony showed great honor to the person of Saint Athanasios. We are mistaken if we believe that, because of the humility of Saint Athanasios (who felt and said that Saint Anthony had surpassed him in the knowledge of God), this great Patriarch did not have spiritual knowledge. Saint Anthony considered Saint Athanasios his own teacher, just as the Patriarch considered Saint Anthony his teacher. The Patriarch had the gift of the written word; but his experience and wisdom were the very same experience and wisdom that Saint Anthony possessed. These things united them in Christ, such that they spoke, taught, and preached with the same mind-set [φρόνημα (*phronēma*)],

the same knowledge, the same spirit, and the common mind of Christ. They were separated only by their personal characteristics and gifts. Nothing else. Likewise, the teachings of Saint Gregory Palamas and the teachings of the simplest Fathers of the Desert differ, not in essence, but only in presentation, owing to the inimitable philosophical and literary gifts of Saint Gregory Palamas.

Second, I must insist that the idea, widely spread by certain contemporary theologians in Russia, that Saint Gregory Palamas created, in his epoch, a *new* and *innovative* theology is utterly ignorant and based on nothing even resembling decent scholarship. This idea is at very best laughable. As the great Russian theologian Protopresbyter Georges Vasilievich Florovsky (1893–1979) emphasized repeatedly in his lectures, the teachings of Saint Gregory Palamas are a virtual recapitulation [ἀνακεφαλαίωσις (*anakephalaīōsis*)] of the teachings of the Fathers of the Church, if not the Holy Gospels, rendered in the nomenclature of his age; they are a synopsis of the Neptic tradition of the Church, which the Lord Himself bequeathed to us in His life of asceticism, a witness which was perfected on the Cross and which blossomed forth in the Resurrection and its restoration of human nature. As Metropolitan Hierotheos of Nafpaktos has written, and quite correctly, Saint Gregory Palamas was a “synthetic theologian,” in the sense that he knew and employed all of the theology of Orthodoxy. He thus underscores the opinion of Father Florovsky.

Now, then, a few specific words about the teachings of Saint Gregory Palamas—about his magnificent synopsis of the Christian Faith: this ontological philosophy of life. As I told you earlier, I am not really a theologian; nor do I have personal knowledge or experience of the lofty gifts of the Spirit about which Saint Gregory writes. What little I know, I

know from my study of Byzantine history and from the perspective of the psychological presuppositions that I see in the teachings of Saint Gregory Palamas, and I can express myself only from such platforms. I ask your forgiveness, should I commit some error in my summary of that *synopsis of Orthodox soteriology* which is, in reality, the theology of Saint Gregory Palamas. You must measure my words against the light of spiritual men and women, who live empirically that which I only understand, however imperfectly, from an historical, psychological, and entirely theoretical standpoint. Thus, some basic elements from the teachings of Saint Gregory Palamas.

The Fall of man. Man was created in the image of God. The disobedience of our forefathers darkened that image of God in man, and therefore, having lost his communion with God, man was separated from the Source of life and perfection. As a result of this Fall, man came under the dominion of sin and death. However, the Fall of man did not entirely destroy the image of God within him, and thus, even in the life of sin, the love of God still acts within the human being, creating in his soul a nostalgia for the life for which our All-Good God created him. And this nostalgia is the source of the human need and search for God and the holy. From a psychological standpoint, we may say that man is ill, suffering because of his alienation from the ontological road which God set out for him. The symptoms of his illness are sin and his inclination toward things—with the aid of the Devil and the evil spirits, who resent the image of God which persists even in sinful men and women—that damage his soul and which even more greatly darken the image of God within him.

The restoration of the image of God in man. By His sacrifice on the Cross and by His Incarnation, the God-Man Christ, Perfect God and Perfect Man, restored

the image of God in man, endowing him with the possibility of returning to the communion with God that he enjoyed before the Fall. "Christ became man, so that man might be made, by Grace, god" (to paraphrase a Patristic maxim that appears often in the early Church Fathers); that human beings might participate in the Divine Energies of God, Who, in His Essence, naturally transcends even existence and Whom man cannot understand or grasp. God is all that is and all that is not. (Paradoxically, as an aside, those who say that they do not believe that God exists thereby recognize, in accordance with the apophatic theology of the Church, that God does, in fact, exist, since, by affirming that which is not, they have accepted one of the definitions of God, if only in a limited way. This is an interesting point, and it exposes both the illogical nature of atheism and the limitations of a theology that does not understand God in His transcendence of human cognition itself.) Hence, by the Grace of Christ, man may become, not God, of course, but a god by Grace and adoption. This deification [θέωσις (*theōsis*)], or *theopoiēsis*, to use the more ancient terminology of the Fathers, takes place through the cure of man's infection by sin and by the restoration of God's image within him, owing, again, to the ontological restoration of human nature by the Resurrection of the Lord, Who, in His life in this world, provided us, by His example, with a vision of the spiritual methods by which we might treat our spiritual illness. Despite His perfection, He became, in His love, an example for the treatment of our sin.

The methodology of spiritual therapy. Man, if he wishes to restore the image of God within him and return to the path which God set out for us at the beginning—that the human being might be taken from glory to glory—, must imitate Christ in His manner of life; that is, a man



Saint Gregory Palamas blessing the Saint Gregory Palamas Monastery

or woman must fast, remain pure in soul and body (and this purity honors and encompasses, naturally, the Holy Mystery of Matrimony), sacrifice himself for his brother and friend, and live unceasingly in love. The imitation of Christ entails, it goes without saying, a change in one's life, or repentance [μετάνοια (*metanoia*), that is,

a conscious turning from a life of sin to the life of Christian virtue]; one must cultivate, in his whole being, the nostalgia for the next life that dwells in his heart, knowing that this life is but a preparation for that other life (something which even the ancient Greek philosophers knew and understood). Thus, we see all things with our

eyes directed toward Heaven, to the end that we produce in our minds a kind of passionlessness or passivity [ἀπάθεια (*apatheia*)], accepting the good and the bad as though they were the same.

From a practical standpoint, we find in the Mysteriological life of the Church, especially by regular confession and frequent Communion, the medicine of immortality, which helps us to return the spiritual mind [νοῦς (*nous*)], through its cleansing and purification, to the heart (from which, through the effects of sin, the spiritual mind is separated and alienated), wherein, as Saint Gregory tells us, there resides the “repository of the Holy Spirit.” Our evil thoughts separate us from the heart and, likewise, from God. However, when the spiritual mind returns to the heart, through the control of our thoughts, through the therapeutic application of the

Mysteries, and by the recitation, unceasingly and continuously, of the entreaty which we make on the prayer rope [προσευχή τοῦ κομποσχοινίου (*proseuchē tou komboschoiniou*)], that is, “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner,” the mind is enlightened by the uncreated and immaterial light of God. The light of the heart purifies the mind, in turn, and gives it the power to see the image of God within the receptacle of the heart, which is the wellspring of joy. It is for this reason that Saint Gregory Palamas continually had on his lips the words, “Illumine my darkness.”

When a person controls his evil thoughts, he comes to see, in this effort, the influence of sin on his life; this knowledge, in turn, creates a sadness [πένθος (*penthos*)] in the mind (a certain kind of spiritual “depression” or melancholy), and



The interior of the Saint Gregory Palamas Monastery Chapel on the Sunday of Saint Gregory Palamas, March 7, 2022 (Old Style)

the mind is purified by way of this sadness, too, since such repentant sadness naturally incites in man a desire for the contrasting joy of God; and thus, he turns his mind to the joy of Grace, which is the therapeutic Light of God. In this way, in his mind, in the Mysteriological life of the Church, and in his heart, the human being is literally bombarded, because of the ineffable power of the love of God, by the Light of Christ. He comes to live, in his sadness and in his joy (accepting both with passivity), a positive life that leads to deification, which is the restoration of communion with God, the cleansing of the image of God within him, the salvation of his soul, and the vision of Uncreated Light, which, as I have said, fills both the mind and the soul. And this first step toward the life in God leads us, by the Grace of God, to a state of joy that ultimately surpasses even

the joy which the First-Created Ones knew before the Fall, as Saint Symeon the New Theologian (949–1022) tells us.

The consequences of the treatment of the spiritual illness of man. When a person clears away the outer covering of sin from his mind, communing with God in his heart, he finds silent peace [ἡσυχία (*hēsychia*)] in his life (and for this reason the teachings of Saint Gregory Palamas are called “Hesychasm”), the gifts of clairvoyance and working miracles, and all of the other gifts of the Holy Spirit. But above all, he acquires the ability to show love to everyone: to his friends, to his enemies, to animals, and even to the dust on which he walks. He becomes a small “Jesus Christ” within Jesus Christ, a god by Grace within the Divine Energies of the Triune God, an Angel (above the Angels) on earth.



From left to right, Hierodeacon Nectarios Hagiogregoritēs, Bishop Auxentios of Etna and Portland, Bishop Maximus of Pelagonia, and Deacon Peter Bushunow

But the deification of a man also has consequences for his fellow man. Every man who is enlightened, that is, who is saved (for Saint Nikodemos the Hagiorite [1749–1809] equates deification, the enlightenment of man, with the salvation of his soul), helps his fellow human beings, and even those (the majority of Christians and other people, unfortunately, who will not come to union with God through a rebirth in Christ) who are lost. Every man or woman who unites himself or herself to Christ enlightens the universe and extends the boundaries of God’s love. And this love reaches to Hades, where those who are not united to God are tortured, not by the wrath of God (for God is love and desires the salvation of all mankind), but by their inability to accept and respond to the love of God, a love which is especially fervent in the depths of Hell. The extension of God’s love by the salvation of His elect is the comfort of the damned, since every man who accepts and acts within the love of God exalts the whole of humanity in general.

Again, I ask that you forgive my necessary oversimplification of the teachings

of Saint Gregory Palamas, many elements (and essential elements) of which I could not cite in my poor words.

I am sure that I have sufficiently tired you with my clumsy presentation. I thank you for your patience, in that respect. Nonetheless, I hope that, with the blessing of our Metropolitan and Father, I have left you with something positive and useful in my words.

Forgive me.

Metropolitan Chrysostomos,
late Professor

An In-Depth Discussion of the Greek Old Calendar Movement. Very soon after acquiring Saint Melanie’s Student House, the Seminary inaugurated a tradition of hosting a monthly get-together of the school community at this residence. “Saint Melanie’s Night,” as it has come to be called, combines delicious delectations with a guest lecture and question-and-answer session or an informal discussion of a given topic. This affords the administrators, faculty, students, and staff an opportunity to converse and to interact in a relaxed venue.



Saint Melanie’s Night, March 30, 2022 (Old Style)

Since moving into Saint Melanie's Student House, the first married couple to reside there, Vasilios and Teodora Athanasiou, both of whom are enrolled at the Seminary, have continued the tradition of hosting Saint Melanie's Night. For the most recent Saint Melanie's Night, we were especially blessed to have Bishop Auxentios of Etna and Portland, Rector of the Seminary, and Bishop Maximus of Pelagonia, a Visiting Instructor at the Seminary, lead a detailed and sobering discussion about "ὁ Ἱερός Ἀγών" ("*ho Hieros Agōn*"), "The Sacred Struggle," that is, the Greek Old Calendar movement. Key episodes from the nearly century-long history of the Sacred Struggle were discussed, with special attention being given to events within recent years, most notably, the God-pleasing union of the Orthodox Community in Resistance with the Church of the Genuine Orthodox Christians of Greece in 2014. We are all grateful to the Athanasios for hosting these wonderful events, and we look forward to many more of them in the future!

Father Gregory, Director of Spiritual Life

A Letter of Gratitude. As we are driving through the scenic valley during sunset or having an edifying discussion with the other students, I am reminded of how lovely life is here in Etna. As a second-year seminarian, I can now say that both socially and spiritually my life has been greatly enriched. On the social level, I am now married, with a child on the way. I was not planning on that part of my life until after college, but when the right person appears, plans disappear. On the spiritual level, I can study the Sacred Scriptures and the writings of the Church Fathers daily while being practically immersed in an Orthodox Christian life 24-7. What a blessing these things are!

When I feel this way, I ask my amazing wife to remember and cherish these moments. It is only thanks to the generosity of all the Seminary's benefactors that we have such an opportunity. In particular, we would like to express our most genuine gratitude for all the donations that have funded the married student home named in honor of Saint Melanie of Rome. Your donations have made it





Participants in Saint Melanie's Night

possible for us to complete our education and not have to worry about finding appropriate housing. Saint Melanie's Student House is a beautiful space, and now that we are expecting a child, we feel at ease knowing that there is a safe place for him to walk and talk for the first time. Thank you!

Such an outpouring of love, enthusiasm, and support for young people pursuing their education at the Seminary is not something I take for granted. I know firsthand how hard it is to make the choice to be a seminarian and then to move out here. Many people tried to convince me not to come here, asking such questions as, "What will you do with a degree in theology?" Now more than ever, I believe that theology is an absolutely relevant subject. On one level, it arms the Christian with detailed knowledge of his Faith and of crucial historical facts. On another level, it can fashion within him the desire to strive after God. Regardless of career choice, I can see and have already experienced how useful this theological training will be for the rest of my life. For my wife, completing the theological program will help her continue growing as an iconographer. Both will be extremely useful as our child is coming into the world.

I feel certain that the Devil, in his malice for mankind, actively tries to block as many people as possible from visiting the Seminary, and he hates it even more when people decide to apply. Why would he want young Christians to become stronger in their Faith? As far as he is concerned, the fewer of us who pay attention to God and the more divided we are, the better. Of course, for us the Faith is a wonderful thing that ought to unite us and encourage us in the face of this increasingly polarized world. We should always strive for truth and unity, "for ye are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28). For this reason, I pray that God bless each and every one of you greatly. In your loving generosity, the Devil was knocked back, and again his plans were foiled! Henceforth, the choice will be much easier for all those married families who wish to attend the Seminary. As much of a blessing as it is for us to receive this education, it has been made much more meaningful knowing that each of you contributed to it.

With an ocean of love and gratitude, in Christ,

Vasilios Athanasiou, B.Th. Student