

"I AM THE VINE,...

...YE ARE THE BRANCHES"

THE GRAPEVINE

Vignettes of Seminary Life



Spring comes to Scott Valley

Life After Graduation. I find it difficult to describe my education at the Seminary. My attempts read as if I am writing a commercial. I can never think of anything negative about my time there, years that I will always remember fondly and gratefully. Even the auspicious timing of the Seminary's founding—just as I was graduating from high school and pondering the next phase of my life—was so providential. I now write to explain the wonderful benefits that I have reaped from this education. Once again, they seem too good to be true.

After my graduation, a friend, Alexei Bushunow, recommended working for Rockside Ranch—a faith-based, life

restoration program on a hundred-acre ranch just outside Etna. I was flattered that he thought I would be up to the task, knowing that working there is a heavy undertaking. The ranch is an institution for young men struggling with drug abuse, alcoholism, depression, and broken relationships, who come to the ranch to complete an eight-month program to restore their lives. They work on the ranch, take classes, and meet regularly with their coaches, striving to overcome their difficulties. I could hardly imagine working in such a place. I did not believe I was ready for it.

Putting doubts aside, I eventually applied for the position of Program Lead,

which requires living with the students, eating the same meals, coordinating activities, and keeping the house in good order, in addition to a nine-month commitment! Since the program is faith-based, it is also important that all employees be Christians and able to help counsel the students in their faith. This, more than anything else, was a daunting prospect, sounding very much like the role of a spiritual father, something for which I did not feel qualified. But, as I thought more and more about the job ahead, I realized that this was what a Seminary education had been preparing me for. I had not just received a degree in theology so that I could sit around and have delightful, well-educated thoughts about the Faith. I had to put into practice what I had learned. Life at Rockside would put everything that I learned in Seminary to the test.

I was the only Orthodox Christian working in a Protestant-run organization. This fact led me to experience my Orthodoxy in an entirely new light. I had to examine everything I knew about the Faith because I had to answer probing questions about my beliefs. This is not to say that I was under attack; my coworkers were nothing but warm and welcoming. But everything Orthodox Christians do is so visibly at odds with contemporary Christian life that it naturally provokes lengthy discussion. I attended a different Church than my coworkers and students. I often had to explain why I fasted from certain foods only on certain days. I had to explain why I did not join in the community prayer meetings and also why I hung strange pictures of Saints on the walls in my room. Before my time at the Seminary, I would have been unable to answer these questions in an intelligible manner.

One of these scenarios focused on my understanding of iconography. Before studying at the Seminary, the best response I could have given to the common, Low Church Protestant belief that Icons are a

form of idolatry would have been to explain the distinction between veneration and worship, to explain that the Orthodox agree that worship is due only to God. This sound defense, one that we have inherited from our Holy Fathers and that has stood the test of time, may not have satisfied my interlocutors. It needed to be shored up by a deeper explanation of why the Church adopted this understanding and how the Fathers felt and taught us about it, including the basic tenets of our Faith. The history of and struggle for Icons also helped in explaining their Orthodox veneration. My own understanding of Icons was changed in learning these truths, which enabled me to provide a more nuanced explanation to others.

In addition to answering questions, I was responsible for mediating difficult situations that arose in the student house, often acting as counselor and caretaker by resolving conflicts and easing frustrations. I found that offering counsels from the Church Fathers or an anecdote from Scripture often had profound effects on students. Prior to my time at the Seminary, I was almost unaware of these resources. My grasp of Scripture was weak to nonexistent, and my knowledge of the Church Fathers included little more than their names. Because my life at the Seminary focused on both learning and, more importantly, internalizing the Scriptures and the writings of the Church Fathers, I have become more spiritually mature. I was able to turn situations that were difficult, stressful, and even at times intimidating into positive learning experiences for all. Sometimes, crisis *is* the most opportune situation in which we can share Christ with another person. But doing so is not easy—and it is not an ability with which I was born.

One struggle at Rockside dwarfed all the others. As I told friends afterward, I had never understood the allure of Ecumenism before this point in my life. Now

I get it. I lived with very upright and fervent people of faith—traditional, thoughtful Protestants. Ecumenism stopped being simply a theoretical question or concept to be studied, and the characters in its story were no longer strangers or avatars of ideas with which to disagree. Suddenly I was faced with living, vibrant examples of Christian faith and virtuous lives, people with whom I had much in common, and still I had to reconcile myself to the tragic reality that I was separated from them. Why? This was a hard question. I certainly knew the answer in words. I knew that we do not believe in a fractured Church of many denominations, that to believe in division in the Church was to contradict the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church as confessed in the Symbol of Faith. But in such moments of challenging questions, it was not enough simply to know the differences between East and West, Orthodox and Protestant. Rather, it took a strong foundation, a foundation in the knowledge of what the Church is and what the writings of the Holy Fathers teach about life in that Church. This was one of the most fruitful benefits from Seminary life—a deeper understanding of the Church and what it means to be a member of the Body of Christ. In fact, more than anything else, this was the reason that I had attended the Seminary: the desire to learn more about the Church into which I had been Baptized and in which I had worshipped my entire life. It was my goal when I entered the Seminary to unite my desire to serve the Church with a better understanding of what the Church is, and it was the success of this mission that helped me with questions about Christianity when they arose at Rockside.

Each of the lessons learned at Seminary shaped and prepared me for the next episode of my life. Perhaps more than anything else, the Seminary helped me to understand Orthodoxy as a way of living rather than just a way of thinking.

For three years, I lived in an environment of diligence, fasting, prayer, and humility, which had a profound effect. Wearing a rason to classes and Church Services every day was a constant, visible reminder of living an intensely Orthodox life. Until I experienced it, this visible and internal molding in the Orthodox life, I could never have known how much I needed it. I am grateful for my years at the Seminary, and I recommend it to anyone willing to commit to the difficult work required. Commitment is key because “he that shall endure unto the end, the same shall be saved” (St. Matthew 24:13) or irrevocably changed and given a foundation for a stronger Orthodox life.

*Reader Timothy Granger,
B.Th. Graduate*

An Ideal to Strive Towards. Many times when I am struggling, my only consolation can be found in reading or listening to the Lives of the Saints. Every now and then, a particular Saint’s story stands out and continues to come up during crucial times of my life. Such is the case with Saint Nonna of Nazianzus.

On January 25, 2021 (Old Style), while visiting the Saint Gregory of Sinai Monastery in Kelseyville, California, I sat in trapeza eating my meal and listening as a monk read from the Lives of the Saints. As I sat there listening to the life of Saint Gregory the Theologian (ca. 329–390), my ears perked up on hearing the story of a Saint to whom I had never paid attention before. It was, however, not Saint Gregory the Theologian; it was his mother, Saint Nonna of Nazianzus (ca. 305–374).

I learned that Saint Nonna was an incredibly devout Orthodox Christian woman who had been married off to a man named Gregory, a member of a Jewish-pagan sect, the Hypsistarians. This mixed marriage was incredibly difficult for her because she felt as if she could

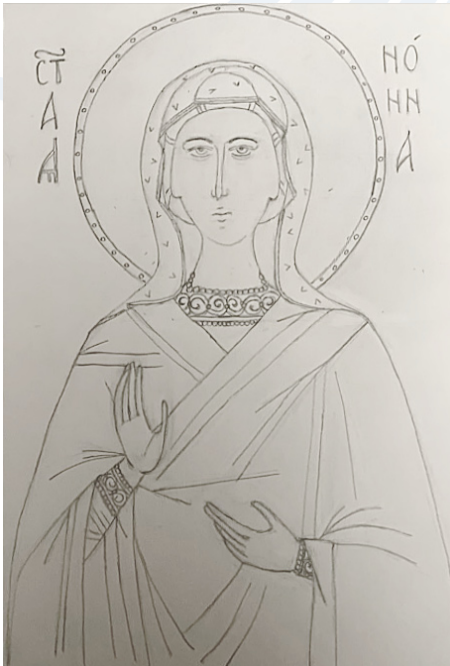
not be fully united with God as her other half was not. Through constant prayer and much endurance, Saint Nonna’s example of Christian piety influenced her husband’s conversion to the Faith. He would eventually become the Bishop of Nazianzus, and after his repose would be declared a Saint, Saint Gregory of Nazianzus the Elder (ca. 276–374). I was most struck by the passage in which her son, Saint Gregory the Theologian, stated, “She was given by God to my father and became not only his assistant, but even his leader, drawing him on by her influence in deed and word to the highest excellence; judging it best in all other respects to be overruled by her husband according to the law of marriage, but not being ashamed, in regard of piety, even to offer herself as his teacher. Admirable indeed as was this conduct of hers, it was still more admirable that he should readily acquiesce in it.”

Saint Nonna’s story intrigued me, and I wanted to find out more about the life of this rare woman. On February 2, 2021

(Old Style), a bit over a week after hearing her story, I decided to contact Father Gregory of Saint Gregory Palamas Monastery to see if he, as the Librarian of Saint Photios Orthodox Theological Seminary, could help me find out more about Saint Nonna’s life. I heard back soon after with two accounts of the Saint’s life, one more detailed than the other, and I was greatly moved, even more so than before. I learned that her great piety also resulted in all three of her children being glorified as Saints of the Church. At that point in my life, I had never read the Life of a Saint who was responsible for converting her entire family to the Faith, much less influencing them so greatly that every one of them achieved Sainthood. Her piety was certainly an inspiration to her family as well as to myself.

I continued thereafter to ask for Saint Nonna’s intercessions. Several months later, on May 18, 2021 (Old Style), I decided I wanted to purchase an Icon of her. Impatient and unable to find an Icon print of Saint Nonna to buy, I sketched one myself. I based it on a photo of an Icon of her that I had found online, and as I sketched my amateur drawing, I asked for her intercessions.

The following weekend, I visited Etna, California, with my brother and sisters. On May 24, 2021 (Old Style), I was asked by Father Gregory if I would be interested in succeeding him as the Librarian of Saint Photios Orthodox Theological Seminary. Though there is far more to that story than what I have related here, I cannot help but think that the intercessions of Saint Nonna had something to do with the incredible opportunity and responsibility that I had been given as the Seminary’s Librarian. For me, Saint Nonna continues to be an ideal to strive towards. Her leadership, patience, and humility make her a model for every Orthodox Christian who is undergoing trials and temptations. May she bless all those who ask for her intercessions!



A sketch of Saint Nonna of Nazianzus
by Esther Schenone

Esther Schenone, Librarian

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spots.edu/youtube



Jeffrey Chen
baking prospatha



Etna Pines

A poem for *The Grapevine*....

I need a starting line:

Hills in Etna, full of pines.

A pine is like a sign,
Pointing to the heavens with its outline,
Reminding us of the Divine,
So we can keep our mind and heart
aligned

On the one thing by which we're fed:
Our daily bread.

Making bread is a tough deed.
To succeed,
One must knead...knead,
But indeed,
There is no need for need.
Necessity prevents being freed.
Will that is free
Is love that is real.

On earth our bread is just a meal.
From heaven The Bread is the Ideal,
Which reveals and helps us heal,
And by Whose sign we are sealed,
Who imbues in us His humble zeal
To suffer every ordeal.

Burning and yearning I hope to feel,
Before I approach Him to kneel,
So that I have a worthy appeal,
And not be dead with dread
In the judgment ahead.

These waters in which we tread,
Will cause tears to be shed.
But as in the Psalms it is said:
Let our tears be our bread.

Let us thank Him Whose Blood was
shed,
Through her who is the Virgin Unwed,
For weaving our lives' fine threads,
Each line combined,
Into one Divine Twine.

Enduring storms yet not being resigned,
But nourished by rays of benign sunshine,
Let us dine together on bread and wine,
And grow into fruits on the True
Grapevine.

Jeffrey Chen, B.Th. Student

An Unfinished Journey. When asked to write for *The Grapevine*, I struggled to decide what to write about. Though I have just experienced some of the most consequential few weeks of my life, I feel that I am still in transition—on an unfinished journey.

The journey started with my desire to find a God-pleasing path in life. While I love what I am studying in college (industrial design), it has seemed disconnected from my Church life, and I have felt the need to explore an art form that glorifies God. Because of this, I began to research iconography and became interested in the iconography certificate program at the Seminary. After several email exchanges, I planned a visit to Etna to attend a few classes at the Seminary and work under the guidance of Mother Justina in the Icon Studio at the Convent of Saint Elizabeth the Grand Duchess of Russia.

I had many edifying experiences once I arrived in Etna. At the Seminary, I attended classes and student presentations. Not surprisingly, my favorite class was Iconography, but every class was engaging and relevant. The students, faculty, and staff made me feel very welcome. They made an extra effort to include me in social activities and took me to see some of the local natural wonders. From the Church buildings to the wonderful local bakery, Etna itself is a lovely place. I was enamored with the beautiful scenery and immediately felt connected to both the Seminary and the surrounding town. The members that make up the community, both Orthodox and non-Orthodox, seem to care about each other

sincerely, making it feel like a welcoming home. Likewise, I learned about the Convent way of life by helping in the Icon studio and kitchen, and working with the animals. The Mothers lead by joyous example; the way they use their talents to serve the Church is such an inspiration to me.

Perhaps most inspirational to me were the few days at the Convent working in the icon studio, assisting in the painting of an Icon for one of our parishes in Toronto. Mother Justina taught me basic skills and introduced some of the theology behind iconography. Her patient instruction spoke for the devotion and seriousness it takes to be an iconographer. While it reinforced my desire to pursue iconography, it also made me realize that I could not continue with my industrial design program and study iconography at the same time.

As my trip came to a close, I was saddened by the idea of leaving. While I hoped to return to pursue iconography after receiving my bachelor's degree, it felt far too long to wait; while I knew that my journey would not be completed by just another visit, I hoped for a temporary conclusion to my unfinished journey. Just as I was wondering how I would endure the three-year wait, I was invited to intern at the Seminary for the rest of the summer. Being delighted by the idea of returning to Etna, I accepted the internship and made plans to return in less than a month. I also reached out to the owners of Grain Street Bakery, whom I had met through the community, who gave me a position as a barista and pastry baker. Although I do not fully know where this journey is leading me, I know that my experiences at the Seminary and bakery (and those throughout my entire trip) have reinforced my priorities and interests and redefined my future pursuits.

When I returned to the Seminary, I was immediately put to work. My abilities were put to the test through graphic design and organization, and strengthened through many other tasks that required me to learn on the spot. Because I was given the freedom to use my creativity and skills in completing tasks, I felt a sense of involvement, productivity, and independence.

At the bakery, I discovered a part of Etna that I would not have otherwise seen, interacting with our customers, many of whom are hikers on the Pacific Coast Trail and who bring stories of the world to a secluded town. I talked to people from all over the world, some who have been on the trail for months, and even reconnected

with a beloved counselor from my childhood slumber camp in Pennsylvania.

During my time in Etna, I was blessed with many unforgettable memories, including a national park road trip, Friday night movies, hikes through a river, stargazing at the summit, and dinner with friends. The relationships established, memories made, and lessons learned on my trip have allowed me to grow as a person, as a student, and as an Orthodox Christian. Although I am no longer in Etna, I feel that my journey has not ended. I do not know where my path will lead, but I am confident that God has allowed my time in Etna to prepare me for the journey.

Elizabeth Wieber, Intern



From left to right, Gabrielle Asgarian, Elizabeth Wieber, Esther Schenone, Elizabeth Schenone, Timothy Schenone, Father George Mavromatis, and Nektarios Cooper at Crater Lake National Park.