

"I AM THE VINE,...

...YE ARE THE BRANCHES"

# THE GRAPEVINE

*Vignettes of Seminary Life*



Summer in Scott Valley

**A Personal Journey.** *The Reverend Presbyter Father Dr. Jiri Jan is the Director of Curriculum and Faculty Development at the Saint Photios Orthodox Theological Seminary, as well as a Professor who teaches courses in Patristics, Dogmatic Theology, and Ecclesiology and Ecumenism. He and his family recently moved from Greece to settle in Etna, California. It is a tremendous blessing to have the Jan family in our community and in service to the Church! The following article has been extracted from a talk Father Jiri recently gave to introduce himself to the Board of Directors of the Seminary. It is an autobiographical message wherein he explores his own journey to Orthodox Christianity and how he has now landed in a place that is giving his life deeper meaning.*

In speaking about my life, I must admit that I feel rather embarrassed. The ethos of the Holy Fathers teaches us to place others at the center of our lives, while pushing ourselves toward the horizon of our world. Therefore, I am going to say a few words about my life journey by way of expressing my deepest gratitude and respect to all the people that God's Providence used in order to guide me through the spiritual desert of the Western world toward the Promised Land of Orthodoxy, full of true life and Divine Light.

I was born behind the Iron Curtain in the former Czechoslovakia, where the citizens were deprived of many freedoms,

including religious freedom. The first person to whom I owe gratitude is my grandmother, a very deeply religious and faithful Roman Catholic. It was only because of her steadfast faith and insistence that, notwithstanding the persecution of the Church, I was baptized in the Roman Catholic Church. However, my mother, under the pressure of official state ideology, and also being influenced by my father’s negative experience with the church, decided to keep her children free of any contact with a religious life.

In this way, I was raised as a typical child of the late Communist period in Eastern Europe. When I turned sixteen, the Berlin Wall fell, and several months later, we underwent the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia. The following year, when I turned seventeen, something very unexpected happened. I am deeply persuaded that it happened through the fervent prayers of my grandmother.

There was an old man living in a neighboring house. He was a tailor and

a widower in his late eighties. Until this time, I had never had a real conversation with him. It was New Year’s Day. I missed the bus that would have taken me to a party my friends and I had organized. Not knowing what else to do, I got the idea to visit this lonely old man, keep him company, and celebrate the new year with him.

When I entered his house, I found the old man surrounded by religious and philosophical books. This day changed my entire life. I stayed with him all through the night, and I returned home a different man. On that night, my soul and my heart awoke as though from a deep sleep, and I heard a voice clearly proclaiming: *There is only one thing for which I long—the Truth.* This old man, whose name was John, put me on the path of the pursuit of God. For the rest of my high school studies, I would visit with him on a regular basis.

Until I met John, I was thinking about going into the technical sciences. Without a second thought, I turned all



Father Jiří and Presbytera Klara Ján

of my interest toward humanities studies. I started my quest for the Truth in the Roman Catholic Church, but was very quickly disappointed. After finishing high school, I entered the Protestant Theological Faculty at Charles University in Prague, not because I put any serious hope in Protestantism, but because at that time this faculty had achieved the highest academic standards for conducting studies in the field of Christian theology.

It was there that I discovered the world of Classical Greek philosophy. After I had lost any hope of my finding in Western Christianity that for which my heart so painfully and arduously sought, Socrates (*ca.* 470 B.C.–399 B.C.) and Plato (*ca.* 424 B.C.–348 B.C.) helped me not to fall into despair and to continue my quest. Through them, I was slowly guided toward the fascinating world of the Greek Church Fathers. From the first moment, I fell deeply in love with them and realized that if there were something genuine and worth studying in Christianity, it would be the theology of the Holy Fathers.

This apprehension entirely determined my ensuing academic direction, and I turned toward majoring in Patristics. My first thesis for earning an undergraduate degree was on Saint Gregory Palamas (1296–1359). As the subject for my master's thesis, I chose the apophatic theology of Saint Clement of Alexandria (*ca.* 150–*ca.* 215).

Although my intellectual interest was more than satisfied by studying the writings of the Holy Fathers, I felt that there was something more essential and much deeper in them that was outside of my reach. And I understood that this something, which I was still lacking, constituted the substance of their theology, and that I would need not books but a living person, someone who had already entered this Holy of Holies of Patristic theology and would thereby be

able to initiate me and guide me. Along with an intensive study of the Church Fathers, I started looking throughout the Orthodox Church for a place where I could find such a person. However, to my great astonishment and no small pain, I discovered that the world of Orthodoxy showed many symptoms similar to those I knew so well in Western Christianity.

By the time I graduated from Charles University, I had finished the tenth year of my quest for God. So many years, and my heart was still complaining that it could not find that for which it longed. I grew weary and started to lose hope. During those long years of searching for God, people would often tell me, "You must lower your expectations, your requirements. What you are looking for cannot be found here on earth. It is an eschatological reality. You must wait for the life to come to experience it..."

The rational part of my being appeared to be inclined to such a solution. After all, it was ten years of intensive studying, traveling, and meeting with many people who dedicated their lives to the one thing needful, to the question of God. But nobody would tell me, "I have found it, I have in my hands what you are seeking from God. Come and see."

However, my heart was absolutely and categorically against such a proposal. Its attitude had remained unwavering all those years since its awakening in the house of that lonely old tailor John. It kept repeating, "I cannot accept anything other than God Himself. Only He can quench my thirst for True Life. Otherwise, I do not see any reason why I should stay interested in the affairs of this strange and irrational world."

When I was about to give up and fall into despair, I met another lighthouse on my voyage toward the safe harbor of Christ's Church. It was an Orthodox monk of the Russian Orthodox Church



Abroad from Jordanville, New York. His name was Father Gorazd, a Czech emigrant who returned to his homeland after the fall of Communism and became a Professor at Charles University. He very quickly understood the gravity and danger of my spiritual state and told me that there was one place in Greece where I could possibly find that for which I was looking.

When I met His Eminence, Metropolitan Kyprianos I of Oropos and Phyle (1935–2013) of blessed memory for the first time, I immediately realized that my quest for God had found its fulfillment. It was a leap from the abyss of the hopelessness of Western Christianity to the luminous world of Heaven on earth. It is Metropolitan Kyprianos to whom I owe my life, the most precious gift I ever received from God. He Baptized me. He became my spiritual Father. He begat me spiritually. He took me under his wing and carefully watched over the growth of my inner man.

He also introduced me to his future successor, Metropolitan Kyprianos II of Oropos and Phyle, who back then was Archimandrite Kyprianos. Metropolitan Kyprianos asked Father Kyprianos to take care of my theological formation and to teach me how to approach Patristic theology, how to read the Fathers, how to progress in obtaining their mind, their ethos, their *phronema*, how to transform my own way of thinking about God, man, and the world according to their standards.

I then returned to Prague to finish my doctoral studies. I wrote my dissertation on one of the most outstanding Latin Church Fathers, Saint Hilary of Poitiers (ca. 310–368). While working on my dissertation, I received a scholarship as a Visiting Scholar at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California. I chose this institution deliberately, not so much for its renowned

theological library, as for the following reason. Both Metropolitan Kyprianos and Archimandrite Kyprianos would often speak to me about a precious gift that the Lord had given our Church in these difficult times: His Eminence, Metropolitan Chrysostomos of Etna (1943–2019) of blessed memory.

I could not wait to meet him. I read his books and his articles, and I prayed God to make me worthy of meeting him. In 2003, during my stay in Berkeley, I visited the Saint Gregory Palamas Monastery for the first time. Meeting Metropolitan Chrysostomos was like meeting Metropolitan Kyprianos three years earlier. Although I could never put my poor intellect next to Metropolitan Chrysostomos's theological mind, I could feel from the first moment how deeply his thoughts and views resonated with those I had received from reading the Church Fathers.

Having received a letter of recommendation from Metropolitan Chrysostomos, I was accepted as a Visiting Scholar at the Theological Faculty of the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, where I remained for one and a half years. Toward the end of my doctoral studies, I was offered a chair as a Teacher Assistant at the newly founded Institute of Eastern Christianity at Charles University in Prague. Although this was something I had always dreamed of and although I knew that this sort of offer does not come along often, I eventually decided to decline it. Instead, I moved with my family to Greece, where I was Ordained a Priest.

I must say I never repented of this decision. There, in Athens, at the feet of Metropolitan Kyprianos I and of Metropolitan Kyprianos II, I could continue forging my spiritual life and theological formation under the surveillance of living bearers of Patristic wisdom and spiritual experience.



In 2015, when I was visiting our parish in La Mesa, California, His Eminence, Bishop Auxentios of Etna and Portland informed me about the vision that Metropolitan Chrysostomos and he had of founding a new theological school. Immediately, without any doubt, I felt that this involved me directly. I assured His Eminence of my full support for such a project, and that I was prepared to do everything that lay within my abilities for its success. I understood that the time had come for me to return to the Church what I had received from Her.

Starting in the autumn of 2017, I began coming to Etna twice a year to lecture. Every time I came, I would benefit from having an opportunity to collabo-

rate with His Eminence, Metropolitan Chrysostomos. Our last meeting took place in 2018, just three months before His Eminence's decease and several weeks after he appointed me a Professor. We had a long conversation. We discussed a lot of subjects concerning the further progress of our school. He must have known it would be our last meeting. He asked me to remain as involved as possible in our project and to ensure that his Patristic vision of theology, his understanding of the role and the mission of theological education, would be embedded deeply and safely in the foundation of our school. I promised to do so, even if at that time I did not expect it would require my family's moving from Greece to the United States.



**Four New Students Join the Seminary.** Nativity Term 2022 began with four new students from across the United States joining the Seminary. Bishop Auxentios of Etna and Portland, Rector of the Seminary, was delighted to welcome (from left to right) Nektarios Cooper, Maria-Helene Goodman, John Ashling, and Symeon Von Hahnke for their first year.

So that is why and how it came to be that I and my family came to settle in Etna.

As far as my duties are concerned, I teach courses in Patristics, a course in Ecclesiology and Ecumenism, and a course in Dogmatic Theology, which I took over for Metropolitan Chrysostomos after his repose. These courses form the core of our curriculum. I was also appointed the Director of Curriculum and Faculty Development. In this capacity, I conduct a week-long Development Seminar every summer for our faculty members aimed at promoting a deeper and more thorough anchoring of their pedagogy in the *phronema* of the Church Fathers. In the same vein, Bishop Auxentios has tasked me with preparing another Development Seminar for our faculty members which will

meet biweekly to conduct close readings of selected Patristic treatises.

In closing, on behalf of my family, I would like to express our deepest gratitude that everyone at the Saint Photios Orthodox Theological Seminary approved Bishop Auxentios’s proposal to relocate us from Greece to Etna. It is thanks to you that we, unworthy as we are, have been given this astonishing opportunity to serve the Church of Christ here at the Seminary.

*Father Jiri Jan*, Director of Curriculum and Faculty Development

**Spiritual Maturation at an Orthodox Seminary.** While every generation of Christians has its challenges living in society, the current situation is especially arduous as we deal with a world that has replaced God with and is governed by



Prayers in the Seminary Chapel

the principles of humanism and secularism. Today's society, on account of its removal of God, makes it difficult for us Christians to focus on our salvation, since there are many distractions surrounding us. Furthermore, the spiritually destitute environment makes it easier for all people, Christians included, to fall into depression. How will it be possible to attain salvation when God is not our primary focus and we instead divert our attention to everything else?

My name is John Ashling, and I am a student at the Saint Photios Orthodox Theological Seminary. So far, I have been here for a semester, and I can confidently say that I would not have learned such extraordinary things as I have had I not come. This school is a fountain of knowledge and piety that positively and truly affects all those who come here to learn. Not only is the Seminary a place of learning, but also a place of spiritual restoration.

I recall my very first day of classes here. It was a Thursday, and my first class was Old Testament, taught by Dr. Demetrios Alibertis. It was very exciting being at a new school, meeting new people, and living in a new home. The class began with the customary introductions. After our Professor spoke, we all took turns introducing ourselves and giving the reason why we came to the Seminary. When it was my turn to speak, I did not know what to say. My reply was...very unoriginal, and we moved on to the next person. Moving on, we were introduced to the books of the Old Testament (the Pentateuch, the Prophets, the Writings). While one would think that such a topic would be boring, our instructor, by his enthusiasm for the subject, transformed it into one of the most interesting things I have ever heard.

One might perhaps think that the Old Testament is just a collection of boring history books. This was at least the opinion I had before starting the class.

However, as the class proceeded, my view changed. I came to understand the rich symbolism in Scripture and the importance of the Old Covenant in understanding the New. As the class has progressed through the semester, I have come to realize what I would have lost had I not joined the Seminary. Nowadays, I usually have more questions than the other students, which they tend to find amusing.

Alongside Old Testament, my other favorite class is Church History, taught by Hierodeacon Photii. Again, one might think this would be your typical, boring history class—but it was not! I never liked history, but I have now come to learn the importance of it. I remember my first class in this course, and by the end I was completely amazed and even moved. This has been the case with every class! I can positively and confidently say that I have learned something invaluable at every single session.

Now, nearing the end of the term, I have come to realize why I made the choice to attend the Seminary. Knowing the Faith is of critical importance. It is not possible to believe in something if you do not know what it is you believe in. I have learned so much about theology and other subjects taught here, but I have also come to understand how much I do not know. Furthermore, on a personal level, my experience here has emphasized the importance of life in the Church. Just as Adam and Eve in Paradise prior to the Fall, our presence in the Church and our participation in the liturgical life allow us to be in constant communion with our Lord and Creator. Saint Seraphim of Sarov (1758–1833) once said, “Acquire the Spirit of peace!” I believe the Seminary, through its training and daily regimen for us students, is helping me in this lifelong endeavor for all Christians: to attain the Spirit of peace. Glory to God for all things!

*John Ashling*, B.Th. Student





*We are pleased to announce the establishment of  
a new scholarship fund in honor of*

## **Metropolitan Chrysostomos of Etna**

*An anonymous benefactor has provided initial funding of \$300,000!  
The new fund will aid students with a desire to serve the  
Church to further their education at the Seminary.*

*Those wishing to contribute to or to learn more about the  
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