

"I AM THE VINE,...

...YE ARE THE BRANCHES"

THE GRAPEVINE

Vignettes of Seminary Life



ABHE Award Ceremony

Gabrielle
AsgarianArchimandrite
PatapiosTimothy
SchenoneThe festal banquet held in honor
of Saint Photios at the Seminary

Seminary Accredited. The Commission on Accreditation of the Association for Biblical Higher Education (ABHE), following careful deliberations, has advanced the Saint Photios Orthodox Theological Seminary (SPOTS) to full accreditation. Glory be to God! This concludes a six-year effort on our part and is an historic and crucial milestone for our Seminary and for our Church, not just here in North America, but worldwide, as well.

On February 17, 2021, our Dean, Archimandrite Patapios, and our Registrar, Gabrielle Asgarian, stood before our accrediting agency's Commission on Accreditation in Orlando, Florida, for a final interview. The Commission on Accreditation publicly announced its decision on February 6/19, 2021—the Feast Day of our Patron, Saint Photios the Great!

The coincidence of this watershed event with our Patron's annual celebration is all the more reason for us to rejoice, recognizing in the awarding of accreditation to the Seminary our Saint's patronage and our Lord's good pleasure. Besides our All-Good God and His Saints, great thanks are also owed to our ever-memorable Metropolitan Chrysostomos, who set all elements of our foundation in place and gave us the vision to labor unflinchingly on this project and to see it through to a successful conclusion.

Last but certainly not least, we owe a debt of gratitude to all of you for your prayers, support, donations, and encouragement. We were deeply moved by the overwhelming response to our request for prayers leading up to this final examination.

Not only in our own parishes and communities across America but also in others around the world, the entire Church responded with fervent supplications, thanks to which God granted that the Seminary achieve this historic milestone. Thank you!

*The Seminary Administration,
Faculty, Staff, and Students*

A Letter of Gratitude. Dear Donors, Supporters, and Benefactors:

May God bless you!

I pray that this letter finds you and yours in good health and spirits. In the past year, your prayers have played a key role in supporting the Seminary’s mission of educating the future clerical and lay leaders of our Church. In the midst of the pandemic, when almost all other schools shut down, transferred to online programs, and struggled to attract new students, our school thrived! By implementing very strict protocols to protect our student body and staff from infection by the coronavirus, we have been able to continue holding in-person classes. Only God’s mercy, granted by your prayers and intercessions, could have guaranteed such an outcome. Thank you!

Your prayers have also resulted in continued growth of interest and good will towards the Seminary, both here locally in Etna and throughout our Church. A recruitment conference was organized last spring, resulting in two laypeople moving to Etna to serve the Seminary with their time, energy, and enthusiasm. Our student body continued to grow to six full-time and four part-time students. A pastured hog, raised by a local rancher, was donated to the Seminary, stocking its freezer with close to three hundred pounds of meat for the students. The library collection grew by two thousand volumes donated this past year, and Saint Melanie’s Student House was entirely furnished with donated furniture and household goods.

In January, we completed an appeal to raise \$50,300 for three years’ worth of mortgage payments for Saint Melanie’s Student House, to which you responded most generously. Once again, God works wonders—we raised over \$80,000 in that appeal! Your generosity ensures a comfortable and affordable housing option for married couples interested in learning about their Faith and preparing to serve the Church.

Your material support was breathtaking this past year. A total of 375 households contributed over \$155,000 combined. Over 270 first-time donors contributed to the ongoing mission of the Seminary to ensure the future of our Church. Again, thank you!

Throughout the year, by these truly providentially inspired acts of generosity:

- You have continued to make the Seminary affordable, making it a viable option for our students.
- You have extended scholarships to two students who otherwise could not have afforded tuition.
- You have helped pay for the continued education of two of our monastic faculty as they pursue doctoral degrees, thus ensuring the strength of the Seminary’s future staff and its good standing in terms of accreditation.
- You have assisted in the launching of a social media initiative, which now engages hundreds of people in learning about the Seminary.
- You have enabled the Seminary to launch a YouTube channel, making the Seminary’s public lectures available to viewers worldwide.

Again, thank you so much for all your support and prayers! With our deepest gratitude and praying for your continued health and salvation, I remain

Your Humble Servant,

Bishop Auxentios, Rector



Saint Melanie's Student House

My First Year at Seminary. Two years ago at a Pascha Liturgy *Agape* meal, I was a catechumen and struggling to respond to a stranger when he asked me what I did with my life. He kindly offered that the future was unknowable and full of possibility, a sentiment I was especially tired of hearing. He then suggested that I might find myself studying at seminary one day, and I deliberately chose to ignore this prophetic comment because I already believed I had expended my last attempt at higher education, and I was finding it difficult enough to stay Orthodox in practice, let alone to put myself in the position of being responsible for homework again. I had it in my mind that my Orthodoxy had to be lived by rejecting all writing and media except for the Fathers and Church hymns, and by clinging without good reason to the underwhelming grocery job I had at the time while sweeping and murmuring the Jesus Prayer, hoping for doubt and confusion to resolve themselves.

Not to my surprise, I found myself enrolled at the Seminary a year later the week the term began. I have only begun skimming the shallows of my ignorance since then to discover it to be even more vast than I had anticipated, yet, most importantly, I learned that although to be Christian is to be guileless, innocent, and simple-minded, cultivating these virtues in no way conflicts with the pursuit of knowledge or education, but, rather, the act is vital to it, in that it sanctifies one's intellectual growth unto humility, patience, discernment, and, finally, a love for others. After all, God has gifted man a mind and an innate desire to understand, but the desire excludes from a heart—inextricable from the mind—in need of profound repair. And when my reluctance to study took a turn to that of the other end of extremes—voraciousness and frustration—a valuable piece of instruction I received was that maybe I could not understand simply because I was not ready.

It was not a coincidence that my catechesis was spent in the care of the Seminary until my Baptism. Before then, I

would stand in the narthex and behold individuals and families preparing to partake of the Body and Blood of our Lord, adults chiding toddlers for reaching for a second piece of *antidoron*, enmity and strife ceasing, and downcast faces turning serene after Communing. The backwoods of parishes transformed into unearthly gardens, colored and perfumed by His Grace. These unspeakable moments of time-surpassing Truth (to which other whispers and trinkets falsely promise a path) present at the *Agape* gatherings forced me to reckon that if this is what it is like for one who is not yet Baptized nor capable of Communing, how can it be for one who is, and even then, how could that compare to when we are with Him? And that was only the initial convert's naïve fervor speaking. A true Christian labors in the everyday, in the long while. I was told Baptism is a rebirth, and the endeavor of a Christian is to preserve the seal of the Holy Spirit which he was given at Baptism until his death.

I am not as reluctant now when others ask me what I do with my life, to which I still answer, “I don't know.” But after my first year at Seminary, new ways of seeing and living have presented themselves, and instead of being enslaved by uncertainty, for the first time I am more at peace with the notion that anything can happen at any point to us which will ultimately lead us to the path of salvation, as judged by our All-Knowing God, regardless of what we think we may be fixed to in our present circumstance.

Xenia Ling, B.Th. Student

Aristotle and Confucius, Part 2. *The following is the continuation of a serialization of an independent study I did for the B.Th. program.*

Aristotle was obsessed with definition, an inheritance of his philosophical tradition. His categories underpin his whole system of philosophy. Aristotle

came up with a list of ten categories which he believed could be used to describe the fundamental attributes of any object. These categories consist of the following: substance (οὐσία [*ousia*]), quantity (πόσον [*poson*]), quality (ποιόν [*poion*]), relation (πρὸς τί [*pros ti*]), place (πού [*pou*—literally, “the where”), time (πότε [*pote*—literally, “the when”), position (κεῖσθαι [*keisthai*]), state or condition (ἔχειν [*echein*—literally, “to have”), action (ποιεῖν [*poiein*]), and affection (πάσχειν [*paschein*]). His idea was that you cannot talk about anything until you have a clear definition of what it is in its most essential form, its first essence (substance) or the “what-it-is” of a thing. This approach has had a major influence on the Western story of thought and is still so deeply ingrained in Western society that people simply take it for granted. Ask anyone in the West about anything and the first thing they will do is define its characteristics. This system of definition is the basis of modern science, and it has proven immensely useful in organizing and understanding the natural world. During the Middle Ages in Western Europe, Aristotle's approach gained such popularity that it became an obsession, especially among Germanic peoples, and the categories were thought to be able to describe the spiritual world too (and even God Himself!). The Scholastics were heavily influenced by this and eventually put intellectual knowledge on a level footing with theology or Divine revelation.

Confucius is sometimes accused of not being interested in definitions, and he certainly does not treat the subject with the same mathematical precision that Aristotle's categories command. However, definition is an important aspect of Confucius' teaching. “正名” (“*zhèngmíng*”), commonly translated as “rectification of names” or “terms,” concerns the alignment of words with

SPOTSLIGHTS. This autumn, Timothy Schenone, our Media and Communications Intern, started Facebook and Instagram pages for the Seminary. A popular feature has been the “SPOTSLIGHTS” series, which highlights members of SPOTS.

Vasilios Athanasiou and Xenia Ling recently celebrated their Name Days—Χρόνια Πολλά! Many Years!—and Gabrielle Asgarian recently represented SPOTS at the Annual Meeting of the ABHE.



Vasilios Athanasiou. He is a seminarian studying in his first year of the Bachelor's Program. Vasilios was born and raised in Maryland. One of his favorite Saints is his Patron, Saint Basil the Great. He celebrates his Name Day on January 1, the main Feast of Saint Basil. His favorite fasting food is lemony quinoa (*which is really good!*).

One of the things he loves about the Seminary is the excellent education and academic experience that SPOTS offers!



Xenia Ling. She is in her second year at the Seminary. Xenia was born and raised in South New Jersey. Saint Xenia of Saint Petersburg is her favorite Saint. She celebrates her Name Day on January 24, the Feast Day of Saint Xenia. When asked about her favorite fasting food, she had trouble deciding, but she noted that she loves anything made by her fellow student, Teodora Munteanu. (*Agreed!*) Liturgiology is one of her favorite classes at SPOTS.

Something she loves about SPOTS is witnessing the monastic life. She also loves that the seminarians are given an expansive array of books to read from the Seminary library, where she is assisting in cataloging the collection.



Gabrielle Asgarian. We would like you to meet our Registrar, Gabrielle. She was born and raised in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. One of her favorite Saints is Saint Paraskeve of Rome. Her Name Day is the Synaxis of the Holy Archangel Gabriel on July 13. Panang curry is her favorite fasting food. (*We love everything from Punjabi Dhaba, the local Indian restaurant in Yreka!*)

As well as being the Registrar, Gabrielle takes some classes at SPOTS. One class that stands out for her is Pastoral Psychology. When asked about something she loves about the Seminary, Gabrielle noted that she loves that everything being taught at SPOTS remains relevant for the rest of one's life.



meaning for clarity and sincerity. One can find uses of all of Aristotle's categories in Confucius' writings even if he does not single them out for theoretical examination. When asked what would be the first thing he would do were he to become the ruler of a state, Confucius replied, “One thing of necessity, the rectification of terms.” When pressed for a clarification, he continued, “A gentleman [君子 (*jūn zǐ*)] would be a little reserved and reticent in matters which he does not understand. If terms be incorrect, language will be incongruous; and if language be incongruous, deeds will be imperfect. So, again, when deeds are imperfect, propriety and harmony cannot prevail, and when this is the case, laws relating to crime will fail in their aim; and if these last so fail, the people will not know where to set hand or foot. Hence, a man of superior mind, certain first of his terms, is fitted to speak; and being certain of what he says can proceed upon it. In the language of such a person there is nothing heedlessly irregular and that is the sum of the matter.” According to May Sim, “[D]efinitions are important to both Aristotle and Confucius because having good definitions of virtues and vices improves one's ability to identify and correct one's weaknesses and develop the pertinent qualities.”

The Body Politic. Aristotle taught that the attainment of virtue is impossible without a supporting community, that is, a πόλις (*polis*) or city. For Aristotle, the need to create political entities, such as a *polis*, is a part of human nature. He believed that virtue could not be learned from texts alone but that one had to be habituated to virtue by seeing good examples and by aspiring to models of virtue, quite impossible for one who lives alone. “It is clear, then, that the city both exists by nature and is prior in nature to the individual.... And anyone who can-

not live in a community with others, or who does not need to because of his self-sufficiency, is no part of a city, so that he is either a wild beast or a god.” This means that the *polis* is required for human as opposed to animal life (human according to Aristotle's definition, of course). “For just as when completed [perfected] a human is the best of the animals, so when separated from law and judicial proceeding he is worst of all.... [H]e is the most unrestrained and most savage of animals when he lacks virtue....” There are two spheres of human interaction: family life and political life, the former dealing with personal interactions and the latter being concerned with one's attitude towards society in general.

For Confucius, filiality is the foundation of a harmonious society; one must begin with one's immediate associates in forming a habit of virtue. In contrast to Aristotle, who defines two models of societal conduct as we saw earlier, for our Eastern sage, how one conducts oneself towards one's family reflects how one's conduct will be in society at large. It is a hierarchical structure: if one can conduct oneself virtuously, one's familial conduct will be virtuous; if one's familial conduct is virtuous, one will conduct oneself virtuously in larger society. “The *Zhongyong* [a Confucian text] also begins self-cultivation with filial piety toward one's own family. The *Zhongyong* compares the cultivation of the *jūnzi* to traveling, where, in order to go far, one must first start with the nearer space, and in order to ascend to a height, one must first start from the ground (Zy 15.1). In order to cultivate oneself so that one could become a sovereign able to govern a kingdom, one must first cultivate harmonious relations with one's family and relatives.”

In our modern times, with the ascendancy of the idea of the ultimate rule of law, there is a temptation to believe that for rulers morality is not really

necessary, as long as they abide by the laws. I think Confucius' emphasis on personal virtue for rulers is a very good lesson for our times.

The Mean. For Aristotle, morality is the maintaining of a mean (μέσος [*meson*]) between two extremes for both action and emotion, the extremes being an excess or a deficiency of a virtue. A virtue is a disposition for achieving the mean of an action or emotion. For example, courage is the mean between rashness and cowardice. It is important to note that while the mean is connected to the extremes, it is also an extreme in itself, an extreme of goodness. One cannot say, according to Aristotle, that courage, in our example, is constituted of rashness and cowardice, but, rather, that it is a point avoiding these two extremes; it forms a triangle rather than a line. There are also different means for inanimate objects and for animals.

中庸 (*Zhōngyōng*, “*The Doctrine of the Mean*”), 大學 (*Dàxué*, “*Great Learning*”), 論語 (*Lúnyu*, “*Analects*”), and 孟子 (*Mèngzǐ*, “*Mencius*”) are the four major texts of Confucian thought. The word “*zhōngyōng*” has been translated many ways, the most common rendition being “the doctrine of the mean,” James Legge’s translation. The most basic meaning of “*zhōngyōng*” is “the use of the middle” and does seem to indicate a mean of sorts. Confucian thought attributes *zhōngyōng* to the *jūn zǐ* as a middle way between extremes. May Sim says, “Confucius attributes this useful middle (*zhongyong*) to the *junzi* (the one with exemplary virtue) and the opposite to the petty person (*xiaoren*). This shows that virtue exemplifies the mean or middle for him. As he puts it, ‘The *junzi* [acts according to] the mean, *xiaoren* [petty person] the opposite’ (Zy 2).”

“*Zhōng*” is not, however, directly translatable as Aristotle’s mean. Further into the text, Legge translates “*zhōng*”

as “equilibrium,” and *Zhōngyōng* presents *zhōng* as the basic state of all things: “While there are no stirrings of pleasure, anger, sorrow, or joy, the mind may be said to be in the state of equilibrium (*zhong*). When those feelings have been stirred, and they act in their due degree, there ensues what may be called the state of harmony (*he*). This equilibrium is the great root from which grow all the human actions in the world, and this harmony is the universal path which they all should pursue.” Sim explains, “According to the Confucian, it is rather a state of *he* (harmony) that marks the specifically human good. But *he* is, if distinct, not separable from *zhong*. Most precisely, in *he*, feelings and things are regulated according to *zhong*.”

Zhong is the underpinning not only of human action but of the cosmos as a whole. “Let the states of equilibrium (*zhong*) and harmony (*he*) exist in perfection, and a happy order will prevail throughout heaven and earth, and all things will be nourished and flourish.” The mean in Aristotle is limited to human action and is a principle to be attained. “Unlike Aristotle’s mean, the Confucian *zhong* precedes everything in this world and is an almost metaphysical principle with cosmic significance. The mean in action for Aristotle is not something that precedes human actions and feelings” but is the goal.

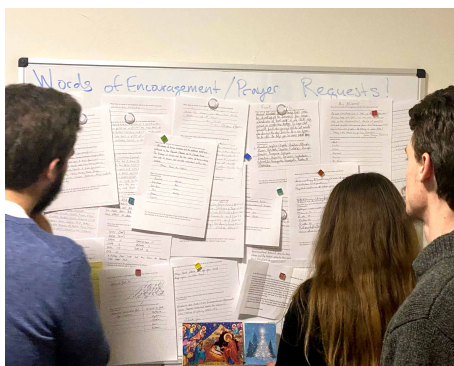
Aristotle’s mean and Confucius’ *zhong* (with *he*) both require a thinking, moral person to be achieved. They are not simply rules that can be applied unthinkingly.

Father Vlasie, B.Th. Student

Words of Support. After a much deserved break in between terms, and spending time celebrating the Nativity of Christ with their family and friends, the students returned to Etna ready for a new round of classes. They were met with an outpouring of support from all

of our donors who responded to the Saint Melanie’s Student House appeal, including words of encouragement and good wishes to the students, faculty, and staff. Following are some of the kind remarks from supporters all over the country, including Pennsylvania, California, Iowa, Texas, and New York. Thank you all again for all of your support!

- “May our Lord enlighten you as you study the Gospel and learn how to be a faithful servant of God.”
- “We are happy to help. As a member of a parish with no regular priest, we understand the importance of helping future seminary students! Maybe someday we can have a priest at Holy Trinity Eastern Orthodox Church in Oxnard, CA.”
- “Blessed Christmas and a Safe and Healthy New Year! Because Mary said ‘Yes,’ ...we now have the precious Hope of the Resurrection! She did not question God, but accepted the message from God’s ‘Messenger Angel.’ And so have all of you.... Be strong in your Faith! ‘Today is the Beginning of our Salvation.’”



Students reading the outpouring of encouraging words of support

- “Don’t give up following our Lord Jesus in the talents that He has given you. Have courage to not be conformed to the world in this day. Be a light and rely on the Holy Spirit at ALL times. Blessing to 2021.”
- “You are able to show the beauty of the true Church. God has blessed you and may you bless all those that you talk to.”
- “It is exciting to ‘meet’ each one of you in articles and pictures! May God continue to bless you abundantly.”

Alexei Bushunow, Communications and Development Director



Chapel of the Convent of Saint Elizabeth the Grand Duchess of Russia on the Feast of the Nativity of Christ