
The Deacon's Program at *Our* Seminary

by Dan Cunningham

With the blessing of His Eminence, Metropolitan Gerasimos of San Francisco and Father Steve, I recently enrolled in the Deacon's program at Holy Cross Greek Orthodox Seminary in Brookline MA. As part of this program I was given the privilege to attend the first two (of six that are required), one-week sessions offered at Holy Cross last August. The sessions gave me a chance to learn more about the program, study Liturgy, Church history and theology and meet a group of really amazing, faithful people. Because of the importance of the Seminary to the life of our Church in America and the need for deacons in our Churches, Father Steve asked me to share some of my experiences in this short article.

The 3-year educational program is intended to provide training for service as parish deacons. It has been approved by the Synod of Bishops of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America in response to the ever increasing lack of full-time clergy and the need to fully support the sacramental life of the local parish. There is no guarantee that one will be ordained after completing the program; decisions on when/if to ordain anybody to the diaconate are solely up to the local Metropolitan - in our case, Metropolitan Gerasimos of San Francisco. The program consists of 6 one-week academic sessions that take place on the Holy Cross campus and are taught by the Holy Cross faculty. Two back-to-back sessions are offered each year during the first two weeks of August. There are also 6 term paper assignments (2 per year) that participants must complete before they earn their certificate. Along with the scholastic requirements of the program, the participant is expected to prepare for the diaconate on his own with support from his parish priest and other local participants where possible. For example, I'm *slowly* learning about chant during *Orthros* services on Sundays (as well as practicing on my own) and I'm participating in a New Testament Greek language study group with some of the other members of the deacon's program.

Because the deacon's program is not nearly as rigorous as the 4-year full-time degree program that the seminarians go through, those who are ordained after completing the deacon's program will have a special status as *permanent deacons*. This means that they will not be considered qualified for ordination to the priesthood. They will also be permanently assigned to their home parishes and are not expected to be paid a salary by the parish. A good analogy would be a crew of volunteer firemen: they are fully firemen committed to serving their community, but they support themselves through a different profession and therefore are not able to work as full-time firemen. This concept of a permanent diaconate is relatively new to the Greek Orthodox Church in the US and there are some skeptics who have raised concerns about the program. However it's been my experience that most clergy and lay people are in favor of the program. At St. Paul's we've benefited from the permanent diaconate program that the Antiochian

Orthodox Church developed many years ago by having some of the deacons from St. Barnabas Antiochian Orthodox Church in Costa Mesa serve at our parish when needed.

In the Liturgy the basic duties of a deacon are:

1. To lead the people in prayer (the deacon says the words "Let us pray to the Lord" approximately 25 times in the Liturgy)
2. To proclaim the Holy Gospel
3. To help with the preparation and distribution of Communion

It's not just in the Liturgy that a deacon can serve: nearly all services have a role for the deacon, and the deacon can bring Communion and Holy Unction to those who are sick and shut-ins. Obviously, anything the deacon does would be done under the guidance and approval of his parish priest.

During the program, our days were very structured to enable time for prayer and as many classes and time for study as possible. The courses offered in the two sessions this year included: Church History, The Nature and Theology of the Diaconate, Sacramental Theology, Pastoral Care, Hospital Visitation, Orthodox Spirituality, Teleturgics and then some assorted meetings and one-off classes. Church History was taught by Dr. Jim Skedros and focused on the development of Orthodoxy in America (this was one of three Church History courses that will be taught throughout the 3 year program). The class on the Diaconate was taught by Presvytera Kyriaki Fitzgerald and Fr. Tom Fitzgerald (Fr. Tom is also the dean of the seminary) and discussed the role of the deacon in the church as well as some historical information about the diaconate. Sacramental Theology was taught by Fr. Philip Zymaris and explained the role that the sacraments play in our relationship with God. Fr. Nicholas Krommydas taught the course on pastoral care which was mainly an introduction on how to listen effectively. Hospital Visitation was taught by Deacon Markos Nickolas, who gave us some very practical advice for visiting the sick. Fr. Ted Stylianopoulos taught a course on Orthodox Spirituality. Fr. Ted was perhaps the most well prepared, clear and intriguing teacher I've ever been in contact with; I hope you had a chance to attend one of classes when he visited St. Paul's in January. Late in the evenings we had "hands-on" training in the chapel on Teleturgics to walk us through all of the things the deacon does during the Liturgy. I was really impressed by all of the faculty that taught classes at Holy Cross. It left me feeling very proud of our seminary and confident that they prepare our future priests very well. I refer to Holy Cross as "our" seminary because of something Fr. Nick Triantafilou (the president of Holy Cross) spoke to us about in one of his sermons. The general point he made is that Holy Cross gets a lot of support from the parishes: it gets its students from the parishes and it takes those students and prepares them to serve as priests in the parishes. The relationship between the parishes and Holy Cross is so deep that we should all consider it "our seminary".

Although all of the faculty were very supportive of us and made us feel welcome the one person we spent the most time with was Fr. Philip Zymaris. He shortened his trip to

Greece just to help with the program while his family stayed in Greece to finish their vacation. In Fr. Phil's class on Sacramental Theology we learned that it's important to understand that God created the world out of love (because He is love), so that He can enter into a loving relationship with us. God doesn't *need* the world, but it's His will to be in communion with His creation. He explained that there's only one true sacrament, and that is the Mystery of Christ in the Church. Christ came, was crucified, rose from the dead and ascended into heaven, but didn't leave us. He is here, with us, in the sacraments. Fr. Phil explained that the sacraments are not just special services held within the walls of the church building, but that our whole life is impacted by the sacraments, and that impact is meant to transform life itself into a sacrament of God's presence and love. It's through the sacraments that Christ works within us by the grace of the Holy Spirit and His intent is that we all become part of His body, which is not a "part-time" job. Fr. Phil also spent nearly every evening with us in the chapel working on Teleturgics, helping us to learn the details of what the Deacon is supposed to do in the Liturgy. Fr. Phil worked really hard to make our time at Holy Cross productive, and we all really appreciated it.

The faculty at Holy Cross were not the only group of people that impressed me. The men who attended the deacon's program left me feeling quite humbled to think that I could be grouped with such amazing people. The background and experiences of these men were incredibly diverse. We had a 33 year-old lawyer from the Bahamas and two 72 year-olds, one who was a retired FBI agent and the other lived on campus. There was one gentleman that had spent 3 years as a novice in a Benedictine (Roman Catholic) monastery and another gentleman who taught himself Greek and Hebrew long before he ever converted to Orthodoxy. We had an EMT, an accountant, a surgeon, several engineers, a children's affairs officer, several veterans, a UPS executive and a couple of priest's kids. We even had a biblical scholar from Harvard Divinity School who also teaches at Holy Cross. In total there were 16 people who participated in the deacon's program and all of them were very knowledgeable about their faith and extremely devoted to their parishes.

We did have some time away from our coursework during the two weeks and we used that time to get to know each other better. I particularly enjoyed a late night ethics discussion I had with my new Bahamian friend Alex and helping put together a swing set at Fr. Phil's house. The current seminarians showed their hospitality by inviting us to a social event in our honor at the married student's common area.

Just before I left for the deacon's program, Fr. Steve said to me, "I hope they don't put you in Polemanakos Residence Hall. That's where I lived when I was at seminary" – which of course meant that's where we were housed. Polemanakos Hall can best be described as a jail without the bars. Fortunately, the only place they could fit us all was in the women's section of the dorm which was undoubtedly much cleaner than the men's section. Don't worry: there were only two women staying in the dorm in August, and they were on a different floor and pretty much kept their distance from all of the

middle-aged male invaders. Although the facilities were not all that nice it was a great experience to spend the two weeks with the rest of the students and have the opportunity to learn about them and their families. The friendships that were formed came so naturally even though all of us came from different places and backgrounds. A brotherhood is being built and that has continued even after classes ended. Since returning to our lives, we've been able to keep in touch via e-mail and conference calls. Two of our brothers had children born. One sadly was very premature and passed away a month later. Whether ordination is in my future or not, I will always feel blessed that I was allowed to participate in the deacon's program and I'm looking forward to attending another two sessions next August.



Holy Cross Deacon's Program Participants

Faculty , top, left to right : Dr. Jim Skedros, Dn. Markos Nickolas, Fr. Phil Zymaris, Fr. Nick Triantafilou, Presvytera Kyriaki Fitzgerald, Fr. Tom Fitzgerald

Students , second row from top, left to right : Harry Zaharis, Dimitri Galetsis, Michael Jeweler, Dan Kennedy, Socrates Chaloges, George Kaloroumakis, Bruce Beck, Harry Chelpon, John Mamangakis, Dimitri Belsito, Dan Cunningham, John Derr, Jeff Abell, Sal Fazio, Andrew Giourelis and Alex Maillas