



The Order of St. Ignatius of Antioch

The Self-Ruled Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America

Works of The Order in Action!

THE ORDER OF ST. IGNATIUS OF ANTIOCH AND ORTHODOX CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP (OCF)

The 9th Annual Orthodox Christian Fellowship (OCF) College Conferences concluded as they always do – with college students longing for more spiritual nourishment and opportunities to be part of an Orthodox community. Thanks to the generous scholarships provided by The Order of St. Ignatius of Antioch, over one hundred Antiochian Orthodox college students attended College Conference, along with their peers from other jurisdictions. One student explained, *“I go to school in Arkansas and cannot tell you how grateful I am, both for College Conference, and for the scholarship The Order provided. There are not many Orthodox students at my school, and being here helps me to remember who I am and why my faith is so important to me.”*

OCF is host to three separate conferences. One is held in the south at the Diakonia Center, one in the west at St. Nicholas Ranch, and the largest and most established is held in the east at the Antiochian Village. The conferences are always tied together by a common theme. This year's could not have been more provocative and timely – "Raise Me Above the World's Confusion." As OCF's new Executive Director, I made my way to Antiochian Village, eager to see this hallmark program in action. The first thing I noticed upon driving up to the Heritage and Learning Center was the array of license plates as students scuttled out of their vehicles. I was then hit with sweatshirts and caps that ran the university gamut – Michigan State, Cornell, University of Maryland, Ohio University, Georgetown, Penn State, and Northeastern, just to name a few. This is a pilgrimage, as college students leave their homes right after Christmas and drive long hours to this oasis in western Pennsylvania. Screeches and tears of joy from worn out students reuniting with friends, quickly give way to calmness, as tight shoulders relax and the students' true selves emerge. The Center was at capacity, full of college students from all over the United States and Canada!

The Village is not just a home for Antiochians, but to all Orthodox. Former Antiochian Village campers and counselors extended loving arms to greet and meet their brother and sisters from Greece, the Ukraine, Russia, Serbia, Bulgaria, India, and Ethiopia, as well as converts, eager for fellowship and knowledge. Through the hospitality and love from our Antiochian college students, everyone felt at home. Late night hallway conversations, chanting during vespers, dancing at the coffeehouse, and donating blood

to the American Red Cross, resulted in a seamless exchange of traditions and practices. Students shared personal stories about the internal conflict of being Orthodox on a college campus. Conversations took place about what it was like to pledge a fraternity during Lent, fasting beyond Fridays, confronting a professor on relativism, hanging out with Atheists without being judgmental, saying no to peer propositions, and merely trying to get approval from college administrators who are not supportive of an OCF chapter. It quickly became clear that it is very hard to be both Orthodox and a college student.



College Students at the Antiochian Village annual College Conference



Attendees at the West Coast annual College Conference

Through these exchanges emerged a community that was further strengthened by the wisdom of our Keynote Speakers and the intimate discussions during workshop sessions. College Conference pulls together the “rock stars” of the Orthodox faith. Bishops, priests, monks, nuns, and parishioners deftly inspire and educate college students. (Our very own Fr. Michael Nasser, Fr. Anthony Bahou, and Sister Ignatia included!) These workshops build on our high school programs. Thanks to the funding from the Order of our many camps, youth groups, and service activities for High School students, OCF reaps the fruits of your investment. These young adults come to College Conference to delve deeper into the faith by challenging, questioning, reflecting, and reconnecting to Christ and His Church. The topics were well suited for our college

students and included, The Challenges of Managing Social Media; Managing Anxiety; What it Means to Fear God; The History of Icons; and Active Communal Prayer. Students left with a new perspective and depth of knowledge on how to raise themselves above the world's confusion and live as Orthodox Christians during their challenging years away at college.

The palpable sense of unity, respect, and love that emerged gave way to an undercurrent of sadness as students said their goodbyes. They were returning to the loneliness and isolation that comes from being an Orthodox Christian in college. They were going back to places where making the sign of the cross before a meal is met with stares and judgment. If they are lucky, there may be an OCF chapter and/or parish close by. However, for most, staying connected to Christ and His Church while away at school becomes a true struggle. This is OCF's number one priority – to reach out to college students and provide them with the support to be an active member of their Orthodox Faith. For more information on The Order go to: www.orderofstignatius.org

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