

A Reflection on OCF

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There is a popular show on the Travel Channel entitled, “No Reservations.” In it, the host, Anthony Bourdain, spends a few days in a particular city or region in the world, immersing himself in the area’s life and culture. Although Bourdain is not always the most upstanding of characters, he has a gift for weaving a compelling narrative in the way he connects with the people he meets, explores the setting, and draws out certain themes about the human condition. I could not help but feel like such a journalist when I was asked to write a reflection on my time at the 2011 OCF College Conference at Antiochian Village last December. For one, I did not have much experience with pan-Orthodox gatherings before, so I wanted to meet fellow students from a variety of cultural backgrounds besides my familiar Ukrainian heritage. Secondly, for those few days I was there, I wanted a retreat from the everyday life I was used to. A week and a half into my winter break from school, I was ready for a change of scenery, and little more than a week before celebrating the Nativity, the conference found me at the ideal mindset to try something new and to resituate myself as an Orthodox Christian. No, I did not have a camera crew, but in nearly every other respect, I was ready for the new experience, and I hope that I am able to share my sentiments on this worthwhile experience with you.

The thing that made College Conference most fun was the people I was with. When I got to the airport, there was already a ring of other students who had gotten there earlier. Immediately, they introduced themselves and welcomed me into their conversations, and fortunately, this friendliness was a common trend throughout the entire trip. On the drive to Bolivar, I learned more about the others, hearing about their previous friendships from the Greek Orthodox Youth of America (“GOYA”) sports leagues or other Orthodox gatherings, but it was clear that I was never on the “out” of any clique. It was unique to share experiences that only other churchgoers could appreciate, things I have never really been able to talk about before with my non-Orthodox friends. Each day, I continued to meet more people from all around the country, but it seemed like we all had at least something in common besides our faith. At night, we would stay up until the early hours of the next day, going to bed not because we wanted to leave each other but because we realized we needed at least some sleep to stay attentive the next day. In addition to late at nights, the coordinators planned social times into our schedule, giving the opportunity to work out with a new buddy at the weight room, play board games in a lounge, or just sit and talk with somebody new.

When we arrived at Antiochian Village, I was impressed with the quality of the accommodations, from the dining hall to the rooms, which resembled a hotel (without locks on the doors, which was nice to think about). We had most of our services in the Saints Peter and Paul Chapel. The iconography was beautiful, and for me, it was noteworthy to see the “Our Father” inscribed in Arabic on the ceiling. The room was full, but I was struck that everyone there was a college student like myself, giving the service an even stronger sense of unity amongst the gathered faithful. I could try to describe the services—compline, orthros, or vespers with what I would estimate as over 200 of us crowded together—but it would not do the live experience justice. At my home parish of St. Vladimir’s in Ambridge, PA, and at church in Princeton, I always serve at the Altar, so being able to stand with everyone else and really focus

on the readings and service was particularly meaningful. I enjoyed hearing different chanting styles, and again, it was beautiful to think that exclusively college students sang all the songs. We had three services on each of the two full days, including a Divine Liturgy at the St. Ignatius Chapel, separate from the building where we had been lodging, on Friday. The last day, we also celebrated a supplication service at the Saint Raphael shrine.

Throughout workshop sessions by various contributors and keynote addresses by His Grace Bishop Michael, we received many different perspectives on the theme of “Raise me above this world’s confusion,” originally from a Hymn to the Most Holy Theotokos, but, as we learned, an idea of dire importance to us. As we named forces that contribute to this confusion, from the media to peers and even parents, it became clear that at AV, none of those voices were present. With that in mind, I could undistractedly listen to what the speakers had to say. There were seven workshops offered, and we had the ability to pick which ones we wanted to attend; while I heard good things about all of them, I was able to find a balance of topics that I found interesting. My first workshop was with Sister Ignatia, who shared her personal experiences and taught us about private communication with God as a necessary supplement to communal prayer. While that session was very personal, the next one, by the Antiochian Fr. Antony Bahou, focused on social temptations and dating, which I heard has always been a major topic of college students’ concern. It was important to be there with similar-minded students to hear that we are not the only ones who feel certain ways when we are confronted by many external forces that often go against what we believe. The third for that day was about iconography of the Theotokos by the priest-monk Fr. Igumen Mefodii, explicating the rich visual and theological symbolism of three different depictions of Mary: the Lady of Tenderness, the Guide, and Lady of the Sign. While I have seen them all before, I now have a greater appreciation for them. The second day, I listened to the rousing Coptic priest Fr. Anthony Messeh deliver a riveting talk about what it means to fear God, and then Niko Tzetis talk about meaningful Orthodox relationships and how social media and websites stack up. While these one- or two-sentence synopses only brush the surface about the types of workshops offered, the important message I wish to convey is that there are a variety of very relevant personal, social, and spiritual topics. In college, I am used to going to a class, having a professor lecture about a topic for an hour or so, then leaving that class and going to a completely different one. Here, there was a very different feel. On one hand, each workshop was separate from the others, and each presenter had his or her own particular message; however, I could not help but feel they were really saying the same thing. I would have trouble defining what exactly that message is, but there is something about our faith that is very personal and very universal at the same time.

All in all, the same chapels and many of the same friends will be back at Antiochian Village when I return next year, but College Conference will not be a four-day experience out of the year for me. To return to my beginning analogy, on the way home, I thought about the “take-home message” from the stay. As Bourdain would do, I had to distill my experience into one distinct idea that the viewers would be able to hold on to. It helped me to understand what it means to be closer to God. At AV, we had time to sit quietly and reflect upon God and our relationship with Him, and personally, that was the biggest thought I gained from the retreat—the importance of turning away from everything going on in the world around me to make sure that I have the right focus, and to realize that we are least likely to hear God when we are too busy listening to and thinking of other things. That “turning away” does not necessarily mean being alone, though, for I am glad to have met many other students who have just the same goal in mind.

On that note, I encourage all Orthodox college students to attend such a conference if they can. If cost may present an issue, there are many scholarships offered that can help, and not even four full days is hardly a significant sacrifice of what many of us have as at least a three-week break. I would especially encourage other Ukrainian Orthodox college students to go, for out of the over 200 students participating, I found only one other Ukrainian, and although we spent a good bit of time together, we certainly felt underrepresented. Finally, even if you cannot attend College Conference next year, do all you can to be a part of your school's Orthodox Christian scene. If you find others, go to church with them, or even better yet, start your own OCF chapter if you need to. I am sure your local priest would be more than willing to support you; even at big schools, OCFs are often only comprised of a few students, so do not be intimidated. Tying this back into the conference's theme, college students live in a world with much confusion, and it always helps to make it through with support from others.