

Campus Ministry

Every Tuesday evening across the street from a bustling college campus, the distinct chanting of St. John Chrysostom's liturgy carries over from a nondescript building, out into the street, interrupting the usual frenetic clamor of campus life. That building is the Patriarch Athenagoras Orthodox Institute (PAOI) and the chanting is from student members of the Orthodox Christian Fellowship (OCF) at the University of California at Berkeley.



OCF Students enjoying fellowship at the annual Easter dinner

The mingling of spirituality and higher education is a matter worth closely considering. Pew Forum studies agree that religious service attendance by young people decreases dramatically during the college years, and Christian Orthodox students are no exception. A newfound sense of freedom paired with wide-eyed curiosity often leaves students overwhelmed in the face of unparalleled exposure to philosophical, social, and political views, which are often markedly different and seemingly more attractive than previously held beliefs.

Ample choices also imply active query and investigation. During these formative college years, students increasingly search for experiences of truth and meaning. It is in this light that the national OCF campus ministry program under SCOPA was created. Today, OCF boasts over 300 university chapters across North America, each entrusted with the important task of bridging the gap between the spirituality America's brightest minds long for, and the One Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church which exists to meet that need for everyone.

Under the auspices of PAOI Director Metropolitan Nikitas and with the support of the PAOI, the OCF chapter at UC Berkeley is committed to addressing this challenge afflicting our college students today. Yet OCF does not approach this as a problem to be solved, but rather as a solution to be lived. OCF participants enjoy a vibrant and dynamic program, designed to be relatable, challenging, and ultimately transforming.

Worship is at the heart of the OCF program, and Tuesday evening meetings begin by celebrating the Eucharistic Liturgy in the PAOI's St. Demetrios Chapel. The student congregation and the priests who generously volunteer to serve are tangible expressions of the multiethnic inter-Orthodox fabric of our Church.

After Liturgy, students are invited to a delicious homemade meal, during which amid lively conversation and laughter, they meet old friends and welcome new ones. Afterwards, the students pour into the living room and the evening takes on a more focused tone as the group discussion opens. Topics vary weekly but each aims to explore the Orthodox perspective on a range of ideas or events pertinent to students' lives.

Another aspect of OCF is its commitment to nurture a deep experiential relationship with our Lord Jesus Christ by serving the community through outreach projects. One current and ongoing project includes collecting high-demand non-perishable food items for the Alameda County Food Bank. Half way through this year we have successfully raised over \$500 in canned food and monetary donations.

Perhaps OCF's greatest measure of success lies not only in the activities provided but also in the relationships that are built. Freshmen and newcomers quickly grow from casual acquaintances to friends of OCF. True to custom, OCF accommodations extend beyond scheduled activities, and students are found making use of the PAOI's chapel, library, study areas, (kitchen!), or just stopping by between classes to say hello.

One such student is Victoria Pardini. Like the scores of other Cal freshmen, Victoria's weekly schedule is laden with course work and extracurricular

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activities, including working as a journalist for UC Berkeley's newspaper. Yet within the backdrop of a busy campus life, Victoria was hard-pressed to find an outlet for her Orthodox convictions. Victoria began attending OCF toward the beginning of the academic year and her involvement in the program grew as the year progressed. Since then, Victoria's winning combination of presence and attention to detail led her peers to elect her to the position of Cal's OCF Chapter President. Her story is echoed by other incoming freshmen; student athletes involved in Berkeley's water polo and crew teams, foreign students, and graduate students from various walks of life all congregate at the PAOI in their shared desire to grow in their Orthodox faith.

The credit for such a diverse group of Orthodox students converging in one area belongs entirely to the PAOI. The Institute's commitment to a visible witness to Orthodox Christianity is the force beyond the scope and quality of the OCF program. This commitment finds many expressions and includes the special traditional Christmas and Pascha dinner celebrations embraced by our students. Offering students both weekly OCF meetings and the daily availing of facility and human resources further manifest PAOI's commitment. Such a culture encourages deep interpersonal relationships between our Orthodox young adults, which often burgeon into abiding friendships and occasionally, even koumbari.

OCF members are pleased not only with activities provided by the organization, but also with the integrated experience it offers. Through worship, service and fellowship, OCF offers to the students' academic life new dimensions of truth and meaning. Through God's Grace and the support of the PAOI, OCF will continue to build on the success of the past and equip students with the tools necessary to foster deep Christ-centered relationships and participation in the Orthodox Church well after graduation.