

Youth Conference Report: Sts. Peter and Paul Parish, Mount Union, PA Father Christos Patitsas

The bell rang joyously above the church of Saints Peter and Paul upon the arrival of Metropolitan Demetrius of America for the commencement of the hierarchical Divine Liturgy. Metropolitan Moses of Toronto and four priests and two deacons and numerous faithful awaited him. The choir was led by Presbytera Katina, wife of the rector Father Christos Patitsas, and by their Godson Panagioti George of St. Mark of Ephesus church in Boston. Approximately 160 faithful attended this the final day of the four day Orthodox Christian Youth/Family Conference in Mount Union, Pennsylvania held between Thursday, October 8th and Sunday, October 11th 2015. All who entered were privileged to behold the chandelier donated by Czar Martyr Nicholas II in 1916 upon the consecration of the church by Archbishop Tikhon, future Patriarch of Moscow, Confessor and Saint. His Eminence Metropolitan Demetrius observed that many parishes possess holy relics, but Saints Peter and Paul Orthodox church is itself a holy relic. The grace-filled Matins and Divine Liturgy were followed by an outdoor procession around the church. Incense wafted through the streets as the crosses, icon banners and priests carrying the Gospel and holy relics led the faithful and the hierarchs around the 99 year old church adorned with three gold cupolas bearing tri-bar Russian crosses. One could imagine he were in an Orthodox Christian village somewhere in Russia a century ago! The procession was punctuated by fervent litanies and many "Kyrie Eleisons". After the service, worshipers feasted on Presbytera Katina's delicious sweet dessert bread blessed for the occasion and food that Lambros Alexopoulos had provided for those unable to attend the banquet at Juanita College's Ellis Hall early that afternoon.

The banquet was festive and a chance for the hard working kitchen crew, led by Lambros Alexopoulos, chef and owner of "Hellenic Kouzina" of Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania to relax as the college staff prepared and served the meal. Lambros and his hard working team had served the hungry participants three meals a day since their arrival Thursday evening. Every dish was delectable, healthful, and plenteous. The conferees awarded him a "four star" rating! Demetri Patitsas was the energetic conference organizer and he too was allowed a little time to relax with his wife Calli and newborn son Alexandros. Demetri used the opportunity at the banquet to thank the numerous conference volunteers, clergy, hierarchs, and monastics. Entertainment was provided by Presbytera Katina who played her guitar and sang compunctionate folk songs about St. John Maximovitch and another about the Royal Martyr the Grand duchess Elizabeth. The Chatzis girls reminded us all of the wonderful Talent Show conducted Friday evening at the Huntingdon area high school auditorium by repeating their wonderful chanting of a polyeleos in Greek. Alexandra Chiosa, a seven year old rival to Shirley Temple, regaled us with a repeat performance of a Russian folk song, "Valenki Da Valenki". Father Christos read a beautiful talk by Bishop Auxentius of Etna and Portland (who could not be present due to his responsibilities in founding St. Photios Seminary) regarding St. Innocent of Alaska. His Eminence Metropolitan Demetrius and His Eminence Metropolitan Moses of Toronto also addressed the conferees informally. During the conference week, Metropolitan Demetrius had met with each of the four age groups of participants in Q&A sessions which all found worthwhile. His Eminence Metropolitan Moses had spoken in depth about the life and teaching and holy example of St. Philaret of New York, the New Confessor. These talks were in accordance with the theme chosen by His Eminence Metropolitan Demetrius, "Contemporary and Local Orthodox Christian

Saints". Mother Agapia of St. Nicholas Convent in New York had spoken to the conferees about the New Martyrs of Russia and Father Christos had rounded out the talks with the lives of St. Herman of Alaska, St. Juvenaly, St. Peter the Aleut and St. John Maximovitch. Father Patrick of St. Gregory of Sinai Monastery was present with the blessing of His Grace Bishop Sergios and had inspired all of us the previous day with his slides and talk about the holy icons.

Reflecting on the days leading up to the Hierarchical Divine Liturgy, Thursday evening began with a wonderful meal at the Mount Union Fire Hall, a church tower building contest using uncooked spaghetti, tape and a marshmallow and informative introductions by Demetri Patitsas, Father Christos and His Eminence Metropolitan Demetrius. A Paraklesis to the Theotokos followed at the church which was lit only by vigil lamps and candles, and then the young people traveled to a local theater to watch "The Ten Commandments" featuring Charlton Heston on the big screen! The group consumed 139 boxes of buttery popcorn that evening! Friday morning began with morning prayers and Gospel reading at the Fire Hall prior to a hearty breakfast. A fun-filled scavenger hunt followed which led everyone back to the church in time to begin the series of conference talks with the bishops, Mother Agapia and Father Christos. These met in outdoor pavilions in a park near the church and in a tent adjoining the church. Friday evening was blessed with the Talent Show featuring performances by "The Vdov Family", Mango West led by Paul Patitsas, Persian guitar playing by Ismael Asgarian, Paraskeva Proskos singing "Mary Did You Know", the Alexopoulos girls' choir and other talented offerings. Saturday morning prayers and Gospel readings at the Fire Hall were followed with another wonderful breakfast and then the group divided into three. The men took a bus to "The Thousand Steps" and climbed up the mountainside where they gathered with Father Nicholas and Father Christos for group discussions of interesting topics chosen by the group. The women took a bus to the "Overlook" above the Raystown Dam enjoyed scenic vistas and, led by Mother Agapia, engaged in group discussions of interesting topics of their choice. The younger people practiced the art of prosphora and koliva making with Yaya Aikaterina Alexopoulos. The nine prosphora produced by the participants were offered in the Divine Liturgy the next day. Koliva created by the group was used in a memorial Service on Saturday prior to Vespers. After lunch Saturday, leaders of St. Xenia Church Camp and St Paul's Fellowship of Labor presented information about their Church ministries and encouraged participants to volunteer. Father Patrick's icon talk took place Saturday afternoon prior to Vespers. Saturday evening a campfire outside the church was a gathering place for chanters, singers and story tellers who roasted marshmallows and enjoyed each other's fellowship.

All in all, it was a delightful conference in which we benefited both spiritually and socially. We look forward to attending the next one! We invite you to join Metropolitan Demetrius next year, July 16-17th, as we celebrate the Centennial of Saints Peter and Paul Orthodox Church, the oldest church in the GOC in the Americas! We hope to see you all there!