

Keeping Students Connected to the Church

by Fr. Kevin Scherer

“Keeping our College Students Connected to the Church” is a tagline for Orthodox Christian Fellowship (OCF). You’ll find it throughout our literature and even on our stationery. It says concisely what we believe to be our primary mission. I’ve spent hours thinking about it, talking about it, and wrestling with it. To be honest, I think it needs some unpacking, some clarification.

When I see the word “keeping”, I wonder whether or not some people unconsciously expect OCF to handcuff students to the Church pew – because we know what’s best for them! The word “keeping” conveys the idea of preservation. The question is: what are we preserving? It’s helpful, I think, to reflect on the *why*, *what*, *how*, and *who* of keeping students connected to the Church.

If I were to ask you *why* we should keep our students connected to the Church, you would probably respond by underscoring the importance of community. We want our students to remain connected to the communities we value – our families, ethnic identities, and religious heritage. Deep down inside, all of us know that communion is what life is all about: communion with family, friends, and God. In fact, we know that our fundamental human need is to be in communion with one another.

To many students, however, the idea of “keeping” or “preserving” anything can be interpreted to mean “controlling”. Developmentally, college students are in a stage of personal rediscovery. They need to own things for themselves – they need to challenge what’s been passed down to them. Although we often characterize their behavior as selfish and immature, in reality there is a deep personal struggle to know and experience what is true. Our mission is to help them discover that it is communion with God, through life in the Church, which gives real meaning and significance to life. When they make this realization, they will instinctively “preserve” and remain “connected” with those persons and communities that value communion with God to be the central priority in life.

So, if communion with God is the motivation behind *why* we should keep students connected to the Church, *what* does that look like? Attendance is the first thing that pops into most people’s minds. But we all know that just because someone shows up at Church, it doesn’t mean they’re connected – you can lead a horse to water, but you can’t make him drink. We must resist the temptation to reduce the idea of communion to attendance – in doing so, we reduce the entire Christian life. Keeping students connected to the Church should not be about forcing, guilt tripping, or manipulating them into the pews, but helping to facilitate the kind of exploration that leads to the personal conviction that communion with the Church is life-giving! Why would we want them to have any different kind of connection to the Church?

The hard question is *how* we do this. How do we help students make these connections and realizations? How do we help them make the kind of personal discoveries that lead to deep moral conviction? To be honest, it’s probably easier and more helpful to identify what doesn’t work. Yelling, nagging, lecturing, and judging will never produce the kind of self-discovery we hope for. Students want us to respect their personal journeys, and we should. They need people

and communities that can provide safe places for them to share what they really feel and think, regardless of their maturity level. It is unconditional grace and non-judgmental love that makes a community life-giving! When students find these kinds of communities, whether it's a Church, a family, an OCF chapter, or a group of friends, they encounter the very character of Christ.

It should be said here, that it's impossible to create these kinds of environments where there is a spirit of anxiety. I know – we hear all the time that the world is an increasingly evil and corrupting influence on our students. Our initial reaction is fear. Fear leads to control. Control leads to anxiety. Anxiety can create distance and shame between us and the students we love – it can even break our communion with them. Hopefully, our failed attempts to control lead us to surrender to God's almighty love for them. All of us – parents, grandparents, godparents, and pastors – need to be reminded that God's parental love for these young souls infinitely surpasses anything that we can provide. We can trust that God will never stop loving our students and working powerfully in their lives. From their conception until their last dying breath, God's perfect love is a constant. He pursues them even when we believe they have lost their way. This kind of divine security means that we can focus on the things that we can control, like creating safe and loving contexts where students feel comfortable exploring questions about faith, morality, relationships, vocation, and a variety of other topics.

Students want to be able to confess the reality of their lives – their thoughts and actions – and not just to a priest. Confession is a normal part of human development. Students are looking for authentic individuals and communities that can “handle” the reality of their complex and challenging lives. They want to find safe places where they can “test” their ideas and questions without being judged. They're looking for contexts that give them permission to mature at an individual pace. They resist, and even resent, individuals and communities that try to control their emotional and spiritual development.

Who is ultimately responsible for keeping our students connected to the Church? All of us are responsible for the next generation, and with some thoughtful reflection, each of us can play an important, even powerful, role in the lives of our students. The best way to affect this is for each of us to understand the responsibilities and limitations of our individual roles. Parents must own up to the fact that they are the primary nurturers of their children's faith. Parents cannot pass off to the Church what is uniquely theirs. The Church, on the other hand, must take serious its role in creating a supportive and resourceful environment. The parish must be a place where it is obvious how every divine service, ritual and program is connected to the person of Jesus Christ. We cannot assume that families will or can make all of these connections on their own. Grandparents and godparents have an obvious responsibility to our students as well. Their lives and experience are to be living witnesses of a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. They must be careful, however, to come alongside parents and not above them. Parents, like students, want the safety to make mistakes and still be respected for their role.

While each of these roles is indispensable, they also face certain limitations. OCF exists to come alongside families and parishes and provide solutions to some of those limits. For example, many individual and parish families are not able to provide (because of finances and program expertise) the kind of large-scale, transformative, opportunities that OCF offers annually, such as College Conference or Real Break. Each December 27th-31st, over 400 students attend three

different College Conferences being held simultaneously – the Antiochian Village in Bolivar, PA; St. Nicholas Ranch in Dunlap, CA; and the Diakonia Center in Salem, SC. These conferences provide students the opportunity to connect with other students from all over the country and from every jurisdiction. In addition, they get to hear some of the finest speakers and professors in the Orthodox Church today. And just a few months later, during their Spring Break, we give them the opportunity to honor Christ by serving the poor and marginalized in a variety of international contexts. In 2009, we will send over 125 students all over the world to serve together in small teams in places like Guatemala, the Dominican Republic, Greece, Constantinople, El Salvador, Romania, Mexico, and the Bahamas. These one-week trips change student's lives.

OCF also recognizes the limitations of the individual family and parish to be present on the university campus. Currently, we have 260 local college/university chapters in the United States and Canada. While each OCF chapter has its own unique identity and character, most chapters meet once a week for prayer, Bible study, fellowship, and food. These local communities provide a home away from home where students can feel connected to their faith and ask the hard questions in a safe and loving atmosphere. Most of these chapters also have a Spiritual and Faculty Advisor that oversee the group's activities and provide spiritual and programmatic direction as needed. Together these individual chapters represent the backbone of the OCF ministry and the future of the Orthodox Church in North America.

We can keep our students connected to the Church, but only if we respect each student's individual spiritual journey, and the individual, but complimentary roles that each of us serve. May God grant us the grace to work together toward this end!