

37th Annual St. Herman Youth Conference

2016 - Washington, DC

On the first day of St. Herman Youth Conference, the lobby swarms with strangers. But out of the chaos, a few familiar faces emerge, and over the next few days, new friends will become your family. Being young and Orthodox, after all, is not a particularly typical combination, and this common denominator transforms strangers into family in minutes. United by a common experience and faith, Americans, Russians, Canadians, Australians, Serb, and Greeks; teenagers and budding professionals; engineers and nurses; PKs (priests' kids) and the recently chrismated – all diverse and unique – will come together.

The 37th Annual St. Herman Youth Conference of 2016 took place from December 23-27th at the Hyatt Hotel in Arlington, VA. Graciously hosted by St. John the Baptist Cathedral in Washington, DC, this year's conference boasted more than 200 participants, the biggest turnout of the decade. Courtesy of the cathedral's rector, Archpriest Victor Potapov, the local committee, and St. John's Sisterhood, conference participants had the opportunity to attend the All-Night Vigil and Divine Liturgy in the epochal cathedral. Honored guest speakers Priest Patrick Viscuso, a priest, scholar, and canonist of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese in America, and Archpriest Peter Perekrestov, the senior priest from Joy of All Who Sorrow Cathedral in San Francisco, prepared edifying lectures for the youth.

The conference was made possible by a generous grant from the Fund for Assistance (FFA) to the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia, which has been faithfully supporting the three St. Herman Conferences held every year in December: on the East Coast, in the Midwest, and on the West Coast. Many of the participants expressed their gratitude to the FFA in a special video, which can be viewed on the FFA's YouTube page [here](#).

On Saturday, December 24, the first day of conference, Archbishop Gabriel of Montreal & Canada opened the conference with an inspiring, if laconic, speech. He reminded the youth that the ultimate goal of conference was not only social and emotional support, but spiritual edification; most importantly, communal Confession and Communion at Liturgy on Sunday. He closed with his traditional statement: "Since this year we have 200 participants here, I want there to be 100 marriages... Eventually. Maybe 10 years?" Thus, with Archbishop Gabriel's blessing, the conference was officially open.

After His Eminence's opening speech, Fr. Victor Potapov introduced the first guest lecturer, Fr. Patrick Viscuso. Fr. Patrick's presentation, titled "Being the 1% in a Non-Orthodox World," focused on showing the Orthodox way in the context of multiculturalism and assimilation. Fr. Patrick began his lecture by presenting little-known statistics about Orthodoxy in America. In the U.S., about 800,000 people identify as Orthodox Christians (hence, Orthodox people indeed comprise less than 1% of the overall population). Only 26% of Orthodox attend Liturgy

weekly, there is steady decline of marriages and baptisms, and the majority of Orthodox youth who begin college will never step into a church again. Fr. Patrick addressed two major problems that contribute to this decline: nationalism and secularism. Still, after setting up this rather daunting image, Fr. Patrick offered a few solutions: prayer, pilgrimage and, finally, nurturing a faith that is individualized and sincere.

Fr. Patrick's lecture, as well as fellowship with the clergy – 16 priests and four deacons were present – must have spiritually moved the youth, as on Sunday most received Holy Communion from five chalices in the presence of the holy relics of St. John of Shanghai & San Francisco, brought to Washington by Fr. Peter Perekrestov. It should be noted that St. John's Cathedral in Washington, DC, was founded by St. John in 1949 when he came to the nation's capital to intercede before Congress on behalf of his flock stranded on the island of Tubabao in the Philippines.

Two days later, Fr. Peter's lecture on St. John of Shanghai & San Francisco mesmerized the hall. He will soon be publishing his second book on the life of the saint, in honor of the upcoming 50th anniversary of St. John's repose. Fr. Peter guided his audience through St. John's long life, telling colorful, little-known anecdotes to reveal the inner life of St. John. When he spoke of how St. John faced enmity and dislike throughout his life, he quoted a priest who said that, while "we all want to repose with the saints, we don't really want to live with them." By the end of the lecture, when Fr. Peter showed some footage from the saint's life, St. John materialized in the room as a human with flaws and character, and yet – unquestionably holy.

In addition to lectures, conference attendees also participated in workshops and discussions. Every evening, there were social activities, such as choir rehearsals – the singing by 50 young people at Vigil and Liturgy was magnificent – folk singing, games including Jeopardy, Uno, and Jenga, and guitar playing. On Sunday, participants explored the capital for a few hours, with an optional photo challenge. The prize went to a group of Australians, who somehow managed to visit every monument in Washington in three hours. Perhaps most memorably, there was a "gingerbread church" competition, during which participants had one hour to produce the most impressive or canonically accurate church possible. After an hour of sticky fingers and competition, participants did indeed create some brilliant houses of prayer.

The last night's talent show was a night of laughter. The judges were a show all in themselves, a hysterical little drama of Aussie sass, Russian babushka senility, and American attitude. The crowning and winning place went to seminarian George Luimes and Seraphim Telep for their variation of the "Twelve Days of Christmas" in Orthodox style.

On Tuesday, the participants set off in various directions. A little dazed, a little exhausted, but happier and spiritually stronger, everybody went home, wanting just one more thing: another conference sooner rather than later.