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Over 600 Young Adults Gathered in Phoenix, AZ to EXCLAIM their Faith!



By Kristen Bruskas, Director of Development and Communications, Metropolis of San Francisco

What happens when you bring together 618 young adults from 41 states? EXCLAIM! That was the theme for the 2021 Young Adult League (YAL) Conference hosted by the Greek Orthodox Metropolis of San Francisco over Labor Day weekend in Phoenix, AZ.

The strength of the YAL ministry was demonstrated when the Metropolis brought back this annual conference in 2019 in Long Beach, CA with over 350 participants, and then in January 2021 with a virtual conference with over 400 participants. Following strict COVID protocols to ensure the safety of all the participants, it was determined that an in-person gathering would be offered this year, and young adults turned out from across the Archdiocese for this opportunity to exclaim their faith through an interactive weekend of workshops, guest speakers, community service and social events, which was planned in its entirety in four months! The 2021 YAL Conference was the largest gathering of young adults in one place at one time in the Archdiocese in over 20 years.

The four cornerstones of the YAL ministry – Witness, Worship, Service, and Fellowship – were fully demonstrated throughout the Conference, and the young adults embraced every opportunity to be immersed in growing in their faith and finding their spiritual home in the Church.

In his video message to the young adults, His Eminence Archbishop Elpidophoros stated, “You have gathered from across the country, representing every corner of the Archdiocese to exclaim your Orthodox Christian faith. I commend each and every one of you for your sense of urgency and for your heartfelt commitment to the Lord.” Archbishop Elpidophoros encouraged the young adults “to discover new and renewed ways of exclaiming the praises of our All-Loving God.”

His Eminence Metropolitan Gerasimos shared with the conference delegates, “YAL is not just something that happens over Labor Day weekend. YAL is a way of life. YAL is your family. My beloved young adults, the future is not tomorrow – it is today! Reach out. Proclaim. Reclaim, Exclaim. Never underestimate that you have the power to make a difference, that your commitment to the Church can be even greater and deeper than those that came before you.”

A special video greeting from John Chrysoulakis, Secretary General for Greeks Abroad, Ministry for Foreign Affairs of the Hellenic Republic was shared with the Conference attendees. His message of encouragement, hope and support for the young adults was warmly received and appreciated.

Witness

On Friday morning as the conference participants enjoyed breakfast on the lawn of the JW Marriott Phoenix Resort, a homeless man was seated nearby. Looking disheveled, unshaven, and covered in tattoos, most people walked by him. A few gave him some money, and others brought him food and drink. One even

contacted hotel security to have him removed from the property. Little did these young adults know that this person was actually Keynote Speaker Bill Marianes, who later entered the ballroom speaking the words of Christ, “I was hungry… did you give me something to eat? I was thirsty… did you give me something to drink? I was a stranger… did you invite me in? I needed clothes… did you clothe me? I looked sick… did you care for me? I was in my prison… did you visit me?” “…whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for Me.” Matthew 25:35 – 40.

What a powerful revelatory moment for the young adults, and what a teaching opportunity it was for Bill Marianes as he offered his address entitled “WHY – LOVE – LIGHT – Being a Disciple of Christ In Your Jerusalem and Beyond.” Bill challenged the participants to be prepared to answer this question from Christ, “What did you do with My church under your watch given all of the gifts I gave You?”

On Saturday morning, Rev. Dr. Nicholas Louh presented his Keynote entitled “Exclaiming Your Faith by Renewing Your Life,” a powerful and inspiring offering to all in attendance. He showed how the path to renewing one’s Faith, Mind and Purpose is clearly and practically found in scriptural and patristic sources. Father Nicholas called upon the participants to realize that each person is a miracle for whom God has a plan, while at the same time does the devil, resulting in constant spiritual warfare. As Father Nicholas said, “If you don’t know Why you are on this earth, the devil will show you his Way on this Earth.” Father Nicholas concluded with these encouraging three steps: “I decide to let the God who designed my life, be the definer who is guiding my life. I decide to fight harder for my soul, than the devil is fighting for my life. I decide that I am not going to believe in the devil’s lies, but I am going to fulfill God’s dream for my life.”

On Saturday afternoon, Bill Marianes served as moderator and interviewer for “Live with the Louhs”, featuring Father Nicholas Louh and his wife, Dr. Roxanne Louh. This talk-show style discussion was driven by questions from the audience about a number of topics, based on the Louhs’ new book “Renewing You” as well as real life concerns from the young adults. Dr. Roxanne Louh, a licensed clinical psychologist in private practice, shared her expertise and offered her special and unique insights to questions about interpersonal relationships, interfaith relationships and how to discern what kind of person is the “right” spouse. Dr. Roxanne’s most memorable advice was for young adults to identify from among their “top shelf” friends as those with whom a life-long relationship could be created.

Service

The first group activity to kick off the YAL Conference was Rise Against Hunger, where participants packaged 15,000 meals for those who are suffering from hunger and malnutrition. Rise Against Hunger is growing a global movement to end hunger by empowering communities, nourishing lives and responding to emergencies. This Diakonia (Service) Project was entirely underwritten by the Metropolis of San Francisco Philoptochos who collaborated with YAL and worked side by side with them to accomplish this goal. Metropolis Philoptochos President Jeannie Ranglas was in attendance for this event and remarked, “Serving others is a guiding principle of both Philoptochos and YAL. We are excited about this collaboration and look forward to working together to continue a tradition of service and to inspire the next generation of women – and men – as future Philoptochos members.”

Fellowship

The YAL Conference provided many opportunities for fellowship and networking, including a Welcome Reception on Thursday evening, and the “Desert Oasis” dinner and dance on Friday evening featuring DJ Bobby Karounos from New York. The Grand Banquet was held on Saturday night with dancing to the music of Synthesi from California. The final event for the weekend, “YeeHaw YAL”, transported the conference attendees to Rawhide Western Town where they enjoyed a barbecue, hayrides, a mechanical bull, table games, and dancing once again with DJ Bobby.

Worship

Daily worship was offered during the conference including morning Orthros services on Friday and Saturday, Paraklesis on Friday evening, and Great Vespers on Saturday evening. Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Cathedral welcomed the YAL participants to the Hierarchical Divine Liturgy on Sunday with His Eminence Metropolitan Gerasimos along with several clergy. Between the YAL Conference attendees and the local parishioners, the Cathedral welcomed over 800 people on this day for uplifting worship. A chant choir comprised of visiting young adults, offered their talented voices during the services. The Holy Trinity Cathedral Parish Council presented a delicious brunch for all the Conference attendees following the Divine Liturgy.

What Is Your Vocation?

On Friday afternoon following the inspirational presentation by Bill Marianes, the conference participants divided into small groups based on vocation, an important innovation brought to the YAL Conference for the first time. These convos were led

by professionals in the fields of Business (Irene Aviles – JF Real Estate Partners, Inc.; Christos Kyriazi – Co-Founder and Managing Partner, Hyperion Capital Partners); STEM (Andrew Contes – Intel Corporation, Engineering Manager; Alissa Koukourikos – Universal Studios, Engineer); Medicine (Dr. Gregory Papadeas, Dr. Peter Piperis); Law (Honorable Steven Counelis – Riverside County Superior Court Judge; Nancy Georgiou Chilimidos – Contra Costa County, Senior Deputy District Attorney); Education (Hon. James Mousalimas – Superintendent of Schools, San Joaquin County-Retired); Media/Communications (Frosene Phillips – Gumas Advertising, Director of Operations, and Executive Director, Elios Society); Non-Profit (Dr. John Moxen – FOCUS North America, National Program Manager), and Creative/Arts (Robert Krantz – Ellinas Multimedia). During these sessions, young adults learned how they can offer their professional skills into service and stewardship for the Church.

Clergy Connection

Maintaining a strong connection for young adults with clergy was an important component of the weekend, with clergy present throughout all the activities, leading daily worship, and also facilitating workshops to delve deeper and more personally into the content of Father Nicholas' Louh's Keynote Address. The clergy who participated were: V. Rev. Archimandrite Chrysostomos Gilbert (New York, NY); Father Andrew Barakos (Assumption – Scottsdale, AZ), Father Apostolos Hill (Holy Trinity Cathedral – Phoenix, AZ); Father Bob Fox (Saint Barbara – Santa Barbara, CA); Father Jacob Saylor (Assumption – Scottsdale, AZ), Father Nicholas Mueller (Ascension Cathedral – Oakland, CA), Father James Kumarelas (Saint Demetrios – Seattle, WA), and Father Alexander Eliades (Holy Trinity Cathedral – Phoenix).

YAL In Your Backyard

A new initiative and innovation within the Metropolis of San Francisco is YAL In Your Backyard (YALIYB), an opportunity to keep current and new members of the YAL family connected and maintain the enthusiasm of the YAL ministry in between conferences. YALIYB co-chairs Eva Marie Kailas and Yianna Papadeas presented this program, and offered this format for other Metropolises to utilize as they wish. Suggested activities include local parish Young Adult events, regional gatherings, and community service projects.

Ministry Pavilion

A Ministry Pavilion, another Conference innovation, featured several Orthodox ministries. Conference attendees received a "Ministries Passport" which they had

stamped for each booth they visited. The collaboration of these ministries with YAL was very valuable and favorably received. Featured guests in the Pavilion included: Orthodox Christian Mission Center, CrossRoad, Hellenic College Holy Cross, Project Mexico, Orthodox Christian Fellowship, and the National Hellenic Society/Heritage Greece. Representatives from these organizations also offered short verbal and video presentations during the conference to further highlight their work. Thanks to the generosity of the Phoenix-area Philoptochos chapters, the Ministry Pavilion also offered fresh baked Greek pastries for all to enjoy throughout the weekend.

Networking by Metropolis

Another Conference innovation was the Networking by Metropolis Convo, where young adults gathered with each other from the same Metropolis, perhaps for the first time! Young adults became informed of their own Metropolis YAL ministry activities, and organized themselves for future events and gatherings.

Keeping Our Young Adults Safe

The planning for this conference required special attention to providing a safe environment for a large in-person gathering. In consultation with medical professionals and the Metropolis COVID Parish Support Team, a rigorous protocol was established for all conference attendees, vendors, speakers and clergy. This included obtaining a negative PCR test for everyone, regardless of vaccination status, within 72 hours of arrival at the conference. We reached 100% compliance amongst all attendees, who completed a sophisticated and streamlined digital registration process.

The Village That Made It All Happen

With the spiritual guidance of His Eminence Metropolitan Gerasimos, the YAL Conference Committee was led by George Anagnostopoulos – Chairman, and Executive Committee members: Marissa Hondros, Eva Marie Kailas, Christiana Konugres, Christos Kyriazi, Penelope Kyriazi, Anastasia Matty, Niko Panagiotakopoulos, Yianna Papadeas, Christos Schwarz, Christine Scolinos, Marina Settelmayer, Costa Theodore, Stavroula Tsantilas, and Jennifer Walters. The Honorable Steven and Stacia Counelis serve as the Advisors for the YAL Conference ministry. Metropolis staff support was provided by: Kristen Bruskas (Director of Development and Communications); Johanna Duterte Carter (Director of Youth and Young Adult Ministries); Paul Gikas (Director of Ministries and Administration); and Father Gary Kyriacou (Pastor of Youth and Young Adult Ministries).

The 2021 YAL Conference was the recipient of a generous grant from the

Archbishop Iakovos Leadership 100 Endowment Fund. This permitted the Committee to make this year's event as affordable and accessible as possible. Additional contributions from several private donors demonstrated their commitment and vision for the growth of the YAL ministry.

In his closing remarks, chairman George Anagnostopoulos challenged the young adults with this message, "This weekend is all about EXCLAIMING – exclaiming your faith, your YAL family, your church, and your community. But that doesn't have to end this weekend. This is your call to exclaim, because if you work hard enough, pray hard enough, and dream hard enough, you can create an incredible life story. Let's make the most of this life! Go back home to your communities, join your Parish Council, start a YAL In Your Backyard chapter in your region, join a YAL conference board, be a Sunday School teacher, sing in the choir. Get involved! It's never too early to make a difference, because a life well-lived is a life serving the church!"

For more information on future YAL Conferences and events or how you can get involved, please contact . See you Labor Day Weekend 2022!

Photo: The 2021 YAL Conference family!

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