

Commitment: April 5, Pittsburgh, PA.
Victoria M. Evanoff
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The anticipation that inevitably accompanies a “retreat” was certainly present when the plane at long last reached Pittsburgh. After several cancellations (the flight controllers’ strike was still in full swing) and a delay which I was sure would make me late for my own lecture, I had had several extra hours to mull over the topic of commitment. How was I going to tell a group of high school kids anything about commitment, anything about feeling the sort of organic meeting with God that was necessary for commitment to come about?

Well, that was what I was supposed to do. As Father Paul Suda’s car hurried both Boris Nicoloff and myself to St. Nicholas’ Greek Orthodox Cathedral, where we were to meet some eighty teenagers and talk to them precisely about this meeting with God, and inevitably with one another, I was scared.

I was somewhat comforted by the fact that I soon realized that Boris felt the same kind of nervousness that I did. We briefly spoke in the car about Christian life-styles, and that eventually turned out to be the sum total of Boris’ lecture. What else is there for us to learn in the Gospels, if not the application of those perfect rules to a life in Christ, the life-style? We got to the Cathedral none too soon, since the teenagers (Boris liked to call them just Christians, with no chronological denotation given to them) had already seen two film strips on dating and morality. In a sense, the topic of life-style had begun before we’d even gotten there to introduce the idea. And the main ideas floating around, in the panel discussion consisting of Christians – including teenagers, parents, and priests alike – were the practical application of a moral life in our social, dating life. It was a good start, but a little general.

The kids were looking for why they should be moral, even though they knew they should, for some reason, be moral; and even though they obviously wanted to be moral. That was organically real, that they wanted to be moral, and they expected us, it seems, to fill in the “whys.” But the most important element of sincerity was already present. Now our sincerity and our commitment only had to be shared, but it could only be shared if it was real, as real as the type of commitment that we already saw in the real desire to learn what went behind the arbitrary life-styles that we all have imposed upon ourselves. A history of morality, and a history of the life in Christ that I spoke of earlier soon because very clearly the task before us. Boris began after lunch with his lecture.

Boris was beautiful! As full of life and as alive with that generation of the Holy Spirit, that day in Pittsburgh he out-did himself for teenagers-no, for Christians. He talked about the different kinds of lifestyles that were offered to us: in education, in relating to others, and in relating to ourselves. But most important about any life-style were the choices that we made in choosing this life-style or that life-style.

The group knew exactly what Boris meant when he said that the uniqueness of the Christian life-style was that we were choosing precisely between life and death, between being free in the Spirit or a slave to this world, and to the types of choices that were already made for us by a society that loved money better than God and that included most of us. But even in the beautiful type of communication that Boris had managed to establish through the generation of that spirit of sincerity, we were still concerned as to how much would remain with these Christians once the day was over. Then it was their turn to think of the different ways in which we, after having heard the Good News of the Gospel, could apply this Good News to our every day life. And more important (or at least more immediate), how this would lend to the building of a real Orthodox community that lived in Christ.

The retreat had already had a good example of building a strong and united Orthodox community in the Clergy Association of Greater Pittsburgh. This conference was one of two, the first was for college students on “God and Man.”

And the whole effort had been Pan-Orthodox, with Greeks, Russians, Serbians and Syrians alike putting aside their national titles to join together and be a Christian community together. This was their effort, and the job of the “younger” Christians was to match that effort, at least by thinking of ways of how to get together, or at least by thinking about what Christ was to us and who He was for all ages. They took the task on like old pros, as if this kind of problem solving had been their occupation since the day they were baptized (isn't this that what our being born into Christ really means anyhow?)

We broke into discussion groups, and topics ranged from a united Orthodox Church in America to the meaning of life in Christ through the sacraments. Then we all got together for a panel discussion and told one another what each group had discussed, and the new tasks that each group had set forth to get these projects under way. The most heartening thing and the thing that I still carry with me, is that the unanimous suggestion was to get together, in Christ, more often, and to have more of this directing one another take place.

The “Pittsburgh experience” is another example of the fact that we can have the same experience that St. Paul did, when he said in his letter to the Hebrews: “exhort each other every day” so that our hearts will not be “hardened by the deceitfulness of sin” which can only separate us. In looking at life-styles, and at the choices involved in them, we do not choose to be separated. We choose to be together; we choose to be one in Christ.