

Wonder

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Title: **Doing the Right Things** Author: **Deacon Alexander Cadman**

When I returned to my *alma mater* three-and-a-half years ago to help guide the very campus ministry that led me from agnosticism to Christ and into Orthodox Church, I presumed I had it made. Having been a part and product of the established and well-known Orthodox Christian Fellowship at the Pennsylvania State University, served in the leadership of other successful groups here prior to that, and studied postmodernism and the Millennial generation while researching my thesis at St. Vladimir's Seminary, I was sure nothing would stand in my way. Yet my first semester as chaplain didn't quite go as well as I planned and we didn't experience the growth we had expected. What went wrong?

It is not as if we weren't doing all the "right things". Our group was very active: we held weekly Bible studies on campus, made daily trips together to the dining hall and the eateries downtown, brought in the "big name" speakers, and attended every college conference and retreat within a day's drive of us. And we had technology on our side—or so we thought. We used Facebook, web sites, and text messaging to tell the world how much we were learning and how much fun we were having. Even though we were getting the word out about everything OCF was doing, Penn State students were deciding almost unanimously *not* to join us.

To be clear: the activities listed above *are* essential to a vibrant college fellowship. Indeed, if we forego regular meetings, socials, and the occasional trip, searching undergraduates and graduates—whether they be "cradle" Orthodox or inquiring newcomers—will simply look elsewhere. Knowing this, we fervently kept our legacy programs and events running—even increasing them when attendance began to plateau—burning out our leadership team in the process. Something was missing and we weren't sure what... Then, it hit us.

We have all heard the saying, "do one thing and do it better than everyone else," but that's typically easier said than done: A campus minister or student leader will undoubtedly spend a fair amount of time preparing for the weekly study (as one should), and yet there will always be some people who inevitably decide they can find the same or better information online. There will always be another student organization—especially on America's pluralistic campuses—with more resources, members, or staff vying for every freshman. And no matter what the group plans to do, it will probably never be considered the most educational or "fun" thing to do on campus, especially when the evil one has convinced so many of our young adults they need to fill the void in their lives with the trappings of alcohol, drugs, and sex. With all of our attempts to outdo ourselves and the various things competing for everyone's attention, we were losing sight of the one quality that makes all of our campus ministry efforts unique. What we and only we can offer is Truth Himself, Jesus Christ, continually and completely experienced through the mysteries of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church. On the campus, young adults are constantly exposed to watered-down religion and confronted with moral relativism and atheism. Of those who *have* entered the doors of a church, most have done so without the intention or ability to fully worship God. Many crave the opposite.

Before the next semester began, our executive committee met and began to remove all the obstacles to church attendance we had unintentionally built up. We realized we were doing way too much, actually hindering existing and potential members from being the Body of Christ. Finally appreciating the demands of student schedules, we created a calendar and crafted communication that stressed first the importance of parish participation. Weekly meetings and monthly student dinner and socials continued, to be sure, but we drastically freed up our agenda to send a clear message that an encounter with Christ through the Church's sacraments was paramount. We also resolved to do away with any undue expectation or pressure on our part that everyone had to attend every event.

The turnaround we witnessed was dramatic. Students felt freer to be who God called them to be. Not only did attendance at Vespers and Liturgy go up, so did the number of people joining in on other parish functions. And while we have always had the unwavering support and dedication of Holy Trinity Orthodox Church in State College, parishioners of all ages began to notice the increased involvement from the University community. In turn, when members of our chapter held special appeals for mission trips and charity fundraisers, our parish family faithfully responded and gave over and above the generous amount already allotted in the parish budget for campus ministry. Building up the Church beyond our parish by investing in the spiritual lives of our next generation became not just Holy Trinity's mission statement; it became its collective calling.

We cannot expect our campus ministry efforts to grow if they exist solely to keep its members busy and self-centered, as opposed to focusing on those who aren't yet part of the group. Moreover chapters simply cannot function properly if they take on characteristics of "parachurch" organizations; acting as if the church doesn't matter, like many of our counterparts in heterodox traditions. A college experience meant to prepare young adults for what their futures have to offer cannot be complete without the spiritual formation that can only come through life in Christ in His Church. Through the Church's sacraments, all of college life can be sanctified and one can become a full member of the saving and healing community of Christ. May our Lord bless all of His congregations to truly become "home away from homes" where students' vocations can be discovered, explored, and fostered.

Deacon Alexander Cadman is a 1999 graduate of Penn State University and a 2004 graduate of St. Vladimir's Seminary. Upon graduating from St. Vladimir's, he moved to Chicago to establish a campus preaching ministry under the auspices of the late Archbishop JOB and was ordained by His Eminence to the diaconate a year later. In February 2008, he became the Chaplain of the Penn State Orthodox Christian Fellowship and serves as the Director of Ministries for in State College, PA, where he lives with his wife, Jennifer, and three children.