

HJ education

Patriarch Athenagoras Orthodox Institute Continues Teaching Excellence, Promoting Orthodox Values

By Terry Phillips

As Director of the Patriarch Athenagoras Orthodox Institute (PAOI) since 2007, His Eminence Metropolitan Nikitas Lulias reflects on the organization's three decades of existence.

He says there have been so many inspirational moments along the way.

Among those he credits for their early contributions are the Rev. Leonidas Contos of blessed memory, who held the first permanent professorship in Eastern Orthodox Christian Studies. That chair was established through a generous donation by philanthropist Alex Spanos.

"Fr. Contos labored for years. He was a person of great education and a well-noted authority on the Orthodox tradition because of his studies in the United States and at Oxford."

PAOI's stated mission is "to educate, communicate, promote and sustain the traditions, values, teachings and culture of Orthodox Christianity."

Originally called St. John the Divine Orthodox Institute, PAOI was renamed in honor of the late Ecumenical Patriarch, Athenagoras I on the occasion of the centennial of his birth. The designation "Patriarchal Institute" also signifies its inter-Orthodox character – the only such

institution in the United States.

This Institute is an integral part of the Graduate Theological Union (GTU), which is an ecumenical and interfaith consortium based in Berkeley, California.

"At the request of individuals from the GTU to the hierarchy here, especially Metropolitan Anthony, the interest for Orthodoxy became evident and was finally realized – and the Institute was established."

As with many great accomplishments, of course, this

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center of higher education was the work of many people. The desire for Orthodox input and participation in the area of theology elicited the support of various leaders in the Greek-American community.

"One of the most significant things under the leadership and the guidance of Dr. Tony Vrame was the establishment of not only a certificate program, but also the Master's degree," says

His Eminence. "We no longer just contribute to various coursework, but we have our own degree program – something which I inherited and have tried to build upon."

That program is not a substitute for the seminary.

"It's a different type of degree," he explains. "We don't train priests." He notes that the Institute does not provide instruction for practical or liturgical duties of the priesthood. Rather, it teaches the academic aspects from history to scripture.

This two-year degree program in theological education is the only one of its kind in Orthodox theology outside of those offered by the Orthodox seminaries in the Eastern United States.

The Institute's coursework goes beyond Orthodoxy and even beyond Christianity. The Metropolitan says students are male and female, Orthodox and non-Orthodox, clergy and non-clergy.

"I had a young man who claimed to be an atheist, take the introductory course in Orthodox history," notes His Eminence, "because he was looking at Christianity from a historical aspect, and

figured the Orthodox had the best understanding. In order for one to study theology and Christianity in a more specific sense and understanding, you have to include the Orthodox approach."

And why would one pursue a Master of Arts degree from PAOI?

Some attend purely for academic reasons. Others come primarily to do research. And some do become clergy.

"While we do not give them the practical tools of how to baptize, how to marry, they can learn those things on the job," says His Eminence. "But we give them the theological knowledge and the background."

Lest one think



(Top) The Chapel of St. Demetrios at the PAOI. (Middle) The inviting living room of the PAOI. (Right) PAOI is located north of the UC Berkeley campus on Hearst Avenue.

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this is an academic ivory tower, the Metropolitan is quick to point out that the Institute is a resource for the community and for parishes, offering seminars and lectures.

There are also courses in Orthodoxy and contemporary issues from in vitro fertilization to same-sex union – and examining the theological dimensions for the Church. His Eminence teaches a course on War and Peace in the Orthodox Tradition.

PAOI is affiliated with the University of California at

Berkeley and encourages students to participate in social service projects.

"Because they have to understand that they have a responsibility to the community and to the world. It's not only to take but to give."

For more information, visit orthodoxinstitute.org.

Terry Phillips is the Hellenic Journal's Senior Bay Area Orthodox Academic Correspondent



His Eminence Metropolitan Nikitas and the students of the PAOI.

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Financial Aid

Students can apply for financial aid through the **Graduate Theological Union**. The PAOI also has some scholarship resources available for students enrolled in the M.A. program. Contact the PAOI for more information.

PAOI

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