

Director charts goals for Orthodox youths

By Barbara Ann Homick
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — John Sbarounis' philosophies about youth ministry are extremely orthodox.

Greek Orthodox, that is.

Sbarounis, the youth director at Annunciation Greek Orthodox Church, 962 East Ave., began his new post on Aug. 1. In his position, Sbarounis will be responsible for coordinating programs for youths and young adults between the ages of 7 and 35.

The Greek Orthodox Church, part of the Eastern Rite, is separate from the Catholic Church. However, the Catholic Church recognizes the validity of all Orthodox ministry and sacraments.

According to Sbarounis, the Catholic Church and the Greek Orthodox Church weren't always separate entities.

The Chicago native said that back in the year 313 A.D., the Roman emperor Constantine the Great granted Christians freedom to worship. Soon after, Christianity was brought to the Eastern part of the empire, and Constantinople — now Istanbul — became known as "New Rome."

After many years, cultural differences — such as language — began to take their toll on the two regions. Latin remained the language of the West, while Greek was widely spoken in the East.

In 1054, during the Great Schism, the Western Church (the Roman Catholic) split from the Eastern Church (the Orthodox). Sbarounis noted that, in large part, differing opinions over the phraseology of the Nicene Creed forced the two churches to go their separate ways.

Today, the biggest difference between the two churches is that the Catholic Church is ruled by the pope, while a board of bishops governs the Eastern Orthodox Churches.

"We don't believe in papal authority," explained Sbarounis.

Regardless of the liturgical differences between the two churches, the 23-year-old youth director said the problems that young people face today are universal. Sbarounis said he is excited to help the youths discover their faith as they work through their problems.

The new youth director has already begun to make plans for his youth programs this fall. In addition to refining existing programs, Sbarounis said he has some fresh ideas of his own.

A group called Junior Orthodox Youth or JOY, which is made up of 7- to 12-year-old youths, will meet once a month to decide on a theme relative to Christ and the church. Activities will then be planned to reinforce the designated theme.

"We try to make this theme live — to take on a form and life of its own," said Sbarounis, who noted that crafts and short skits are effective ways to bring home certain messages.

Members of the JOY group will also participate in activities, ranging from pumpkin picking to ice skating, to help build relationships within the group, he said.

The teen group, entitled Greek Orthodox Youth of America or GOYA, targets youths between the ages of 13 and 18. GOYA will also meet once a month, but Sbarounis said he expects work with the teen group to be a bit more challenging.

"Now we are talking about the teen years and adolescence. As you know and I know, that's a very bizarre time. It's incredibly hard," said the youth director.

Since Sbarounis is not too far removed from his own teen years, he said he understands how some teenagers perceive attending church activities.

"It's just not hip at that age to admit to being religious," he noted. "It's just not



Babette G. Augustin/Staff photographer
John Sbarounis, the new youth director at Annunciation Greek Orthodox Church in Rochester, will coordinate programs for parishioners between the ages of 7 and 35.

cool to admit that you want to have a relationship with God."

In an effort to remain "cool" among their peers, Sbarounis said many teenagers put up walls. Breaking down those walls is what GOYA is all about, he said.

According to the youth director, GOYA will also be involved in many service projects this fall. The group plans to volunteer at such agencies as the Ronald McDonald House, soup kitchens and homes for the elderly.

"I would like to expand on our social outreach," noted Sbarounis. "There is something really spiritual about serving others that can be used as a prayer of sorts."

The third group, Young Adult League or YAL, is aimed at those aged 18 to 35.

"The purpose of this group is to get their faith and tradition to influence their lives," said Sbarounis.

Sbarounis noted that all three programs are based on the following four Greek principles: *Liturgia* (liturgy); *Koinonia* (community); *Diakonia* (service); and *Martyria* (witness).

Of the three existing programs, Sbarounis said that the JOY program needs the least development.

"The JOY program is almost running on

its own because the kids are so excited. They haven't become skeptical yet," he explained.

On the other hand, he stressed that the teen program will be the most difficult to structure.

"If I can work with the teenage kids to become more aware of the world around them and some of the messages they are being fed, then they can make a conscious decision on their own to answer the call that Christ has given them and the church has echoed to them," remarked Sbarounis.

And although Sbarounis has never served as a youth minister in the Catholic Church, he said he doesn't think that the two churches differ too much on how to relate to youths.

"I think youth ministry is pretty ecumenical. Kids basically today face the same issues," explained Sbarounis.

On the other hand, Sbarounis said growing up in the Greek Orthodox Church gives his youths a little different perspective.

"You can't deny the particularities of our faith traditions. The thing that makes Orthodox youths different are the icons, the music and the services, and the different ways they impact on their lives."

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