

The Little Churches

By Metropolitan Saba (Isper)

The family is considered the first church of every believer. It is there that one learns the first steps of faith and reverence, the love of God, and the practice of virtue. The larger church, the parish, is nothing other than the union of these smaller “domestic churches.” The more faithfully our families live out their faith, the more they will raise men and women filled with love, zeal, and devotion. In turn, the Church of God is strengthened, producing saints and witnesses, men and women committed to serving both God and society.

Within the Church, believers experience the communion of one faith, which makes them one body, a single family. Christians are called to live with a deep awareness of this spiritual kinship, for in the Holy Eucharist, Christ Himself establishes a bond stronger than blood or tribe.

This communion must not remain an idea; it must be lived out. When it is broken by division or offense, the Gospel commands us to refrain from approaching the holy chalice or offering sacrifice until reconciliation has taken place: “If you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift” (Matthew 5:23–24).

From here comes the very meaning of the parish: one temple for a community of believers living in the same area. When someone worships in their parish church, they are called to form genuine spiritual bonds with its members. Commitment to one’s parish strengthens responsibility toward brothers and sisters in Christ, nurturing a deeper sense of the Church and the importance of communion. This lived experience should, in turn, extend outward to embrace all humanity.

Sadly, this sense of communion is often weak. One reason is that many approach communal prayer without deep understanding, reducing it to a mere “duty” instead of living it as the shared expression of faith. Another reason is an overemphasis on ritual and celebration at the expense of the personal, spiritual communion that

should exist between the believer and God, between one another, and ultimately with all people.

For these reasons, the Church encourages the formation of small groups made up of a few individuals or families who share a common concern, goal, or ministry. These groups gather first for prayer, and then also for a particular service either spiritual or humanitarian. United by a shared purpose, their relationships grow deeper, and they come to experience more fully their spiritual kinship, provided they remain rooted in the truth of the Gospel.

This emphasis on small communities was one of the great contributions of the Antiochian Orthodox Youth Movement¹. It taught its members to live in communion with one another, and through this, to discover the wider communion of the Church. Many who grew within the Movement tasted the beauty and sweetness of Christian fellowship, carrying one another's burdens just like the first Christians, and learning in practice—not merely in theory—that the Church is truly the family of God.

In our own time, when individualism is exalted above all else, people often live in a crushing loneliness. They may have colleagues at work, classmates, or neighbors, but what they lack most are deep, heartfelt relationships built on spiritual foundations, relationships that sustain and are sustained in return. Even genuine friendship has become rare in today's world. Sociologists sometimes describe this reality with the phrase “loneliness in the crowd.”

An old story illustrates this. In the 1970s, the Soviet newspaper *Pravda* reported on why many Russians, after retirement, were returning to the Church. One such man, a factory director, had been honored upon retirement but soon found himself alone. Divorced, with children living far away, he grew increasingly sad and isolated. Day after day, he sat in the neighborhood café with his newspaper and coffee, his face marked by loneliness. Another retired man noticed his sorrow and asked the reason. After hearing his story, he simply told him, “Come to church, and you will

¹ Founded in 1942, the Orthodox Youth Movement revitalized the Church in the Middle East. It maintains a vital role to this day.

not be alone.” And it was so. In the church, fellow worshippers welcomed him, cared for him, and bonded in friendship with him.

Many people today seek this same care from the Church, but they often place the entire burden on the priest, forgetting that love for the Lord also requires love for one another, expressed through real care and support. While the priest is indeed the shepherd and primarily responsible, the parish does not belong to him alone. The Church is Christ’s, and all her children are called to share in her life and ministries whether educational, pastoral, social, and charitable.

For this reason, it has become urgent that believers form small groups of prayer and service, united not only by faith but also by a shared concern, so that together they may labor to address it. The needs today are many, and the opportunities for service are countless, especially in these difficult times!

If you carry your burden alone, it will weigh you down. But when you share it with your brothers and sisters, working together under the guidance of a spiritual father, you will find joy as you bring joy to others. In sharing, you will experience the warmth of communion and the happiness that comes from selfless love.

How much we need workshops of prayer and service—communities that radiate the joy of Christ’s Resurrection in our suffering world. These are to be rooted in prayer, reflection on the Word of God, and the effort to live it daily first and foremost in personal life, then in family, parish, and society.

Such “little churches,” when they exist, become leaven, bringing the living presence of Christ ever more powerfully into our lives, our families, and our communities.