



An Extended Family in Christ

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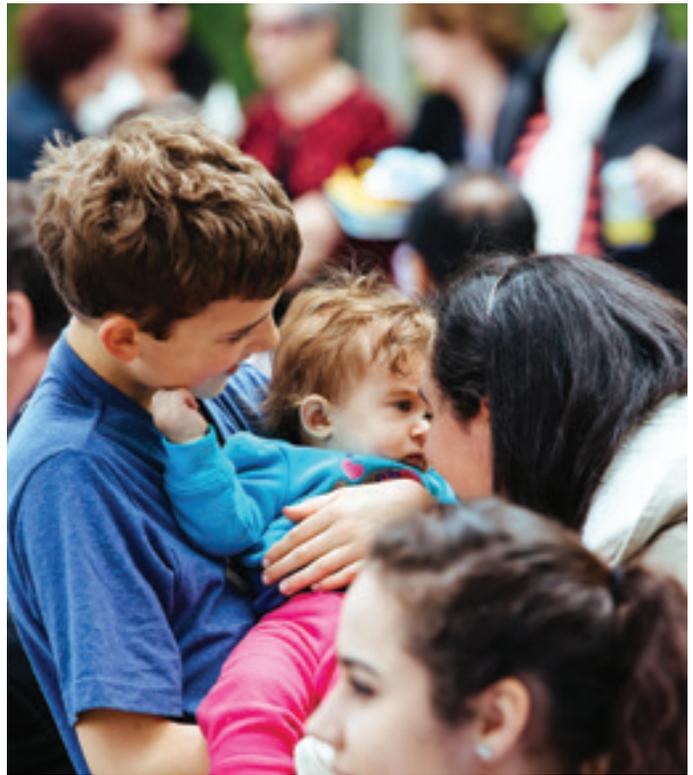
I grew up in a small town outside of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. To this day, the majority of my family still resides there. Yet I know in my heart that my family extends much further than that. I am speaking, of course, of my church family. Perhaps like many of you, I have had the blessing of attending various Orthodox churches throughout my life. Whether I moved for school or for a job, whether I was on vacation or merely wanted a new experience on a Sunday morning, I knew that with the help of God (and Google Maps) I could find an Orthodox church nearby. This concept of “church family” never sunk in until I moved to Jacksonville, Florida, and began working at St. John the Divine Greek Orthodox Church. I noticed my priest always referred to his parishioners as his “church family.” Naturally, I assumed he meant he was related to a large portion of the congregation because I had never heard the concept before. However, I soon discovered that it was much deeper than that.

The more time I spend with my fellow parishioners, the more I realize just how much Father's words rang true. The children of the parish quickly became my children. When they lose a tooth, they bring it in so I can see it and guess how much money the tooth fairy will leave them. The high schoolers leave for college, and I cry when saying goodbye. The adults of the parish became my parents, sending me cards on my birthday and checking in with me if there is a horrible storm nearby. The "yiayias" and "pappous" (grandmothers and grandfathers) became my own and the young adults became my siblings. We celebrate birthdays together, mourn losses together and, most importantly, pray together. Though we all come from different backgrounds, we are indeed a church family, and one that I cherish dearly.

Isn't this what Christ encourages for us—that we become a family with everyone? These relationships that we foster within our respective churches can teach us so much about who Christ yearns for us to be. In the parish, we are surrounded by people who share our same values, which is hard to come by otherwise. Though we are all fallen and struggling with sin, we are able to work together as a team and encourage each other toward salvation.

When we are baptized and chrismated into the Orthodox Church we join one of the most beautiful and traditional faiths ever established. However, what we may fail to understand is that this concept of family within the church extends far beyond the limits of four walls. The world we live in today has seen so much pain and suffering. It's easy to get caught up in the mayhem and focus on the negative. There is still so much good in the world and so many people who embody God's Word. That goodness is a light that can illumine the darkness we constantly feel swallowed up by, and it is an extension of God's great love for us.

The man who pulled over to help me with my flat tire? He is my family. The men and women who sacrifice their lives for me and my country? They are my family. The children who went to a nursing home to sing? They are my family. Christ tells us, "For whoever does the will of My Father in heaven is My brother and sister and mother" (Matthew 12:50). He does not limit this family to Orthodox Christians. Instead, he is referring to all His people: those doing the good work of Christ are our brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers. They are indeed our family.



It is so beneficial for us to form relationships inside the Church. It molds us into Christ-like beings with firm foundations in the Truth of our faith. However, we must remember that our work is not complete. We must take this Truth and share it with the world, extending our family to the ends of the earth. Christ tells His disciples to "go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature" (Mark 16:15). What better way to preach the Gospel than with the love of a family?

I encourage us, as Orthodox Christians, to grow our families even larger. Look past the labels of labels of "Greek" or "Orthodox." Reach out beyond the limits of our congregations and minister to anyone you encounter. Who knows? You may be the family that person has been yearning to find, the one that everyone deserves.

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