

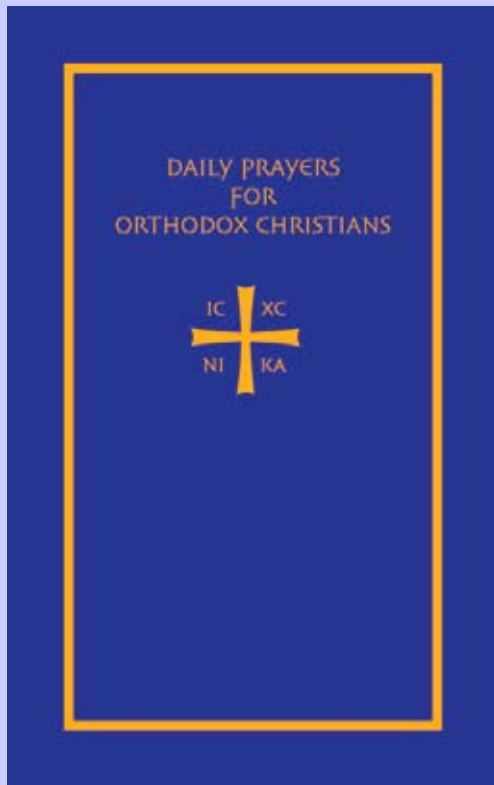
# Agape Circle

## A New Small-Group Program for Adults

by Dcn. Markos Nickolas

*Where two or three are gathered in my Name, I am in their midst.*

Jesus of Nazareth (Matthew 18:20)



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In the fall of 2007, more than 200 Greek Orthodox adults participated in more than thirty small groups called “Agape Circles” across the United States, including the following locations: Tacoma, WA, Seattle, WA, Shoreline, WA, Sacramento, CA, San Francisco, CA, Los Angeles, CA, Redondo Beach, CA, Watkinsville, GA, Birmingham, AL, Greenville, SC, Randolph, NJ, Hunterdon County, NJ, Hempstead, NY, Cranston, RI, Mansfield, MA, Brookline, MA, Dover, NH, Lancaster, PA, Broomall, PA, Akron, OH, Columbus, OH, Racine, WI, Palos Hills, IL, Swansea, IL, and St. Louis, MO. The Circles met at churches and in private homes for seven consecutive weeks. They prayed together, read Scripture and spiritual texts together, and, above all, shared their personal stories. Their purpose was to support each other as Christians in the world, called to grow in *koinonia* (fellowship) and *agape* (love). The following article is a statement from one Agape Circle facilitator.

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*Dcn. Markos Nickolas is a PhD candidate in pastoral psychology at Boston University. He is an adjunct instructor at Hellenic College–Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology. For additional information on Agape Circle, go to [www.agapecircle.com](http://www.agapecircle.com).*

# Growing Together in *Koinonia* and *Agape*

By Angela Ferreira

Jesus Christ said, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself” (Luke 10:27). The Greek word for “love” is *agape*, and *koinonia* is the Greek word for “fellowship” and “communion.” Fellowship in love, the love of the Holy Trinity, is the inspiration for an exciting new small-group program for adults, Agape Circle.

In the summer of 2007, I received an e-mail from Deacon Markos Nickolas, a field education instructor at Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology. He was putting together a project for his doctoral dissertation in pastoral psychology at Boston University. The aim of his project was to enable Orthodox Christian adults to build deeper bonds of fellowship and to help each other grow in love. He believed that small, local, face-to-face discussion groups could help participants grow closer together in Christ. He believed that this type of intimate Christian



fellowship would provide a good supplement to the weekly Divine Liturgy and other parish activities. The goal was simply to help participants experience and live more fully the Orthodox Christian values of *koinonia* and *agape* in daily life.

Specifically, Dcn. Markos was looking for volunteers throughout the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese to participate in small groups of five to seven adults to meet locally for seven consecutive weeks and follow the format he designed. This curriculum included prayer, sacred readings, introspective reflection, interactive exercises and interpersonal sharing on the topic of God’s love in our lives. Each Agape Circle would be led by a facilitator, who needed to receive the blessing of the parish priest. Attendance at all sessions would be critical to allow the group to build trust and relate to each other on a deeper, more personal level than we usually do at Sunday

coffee hour or even at Bible studies. To fulfill the requirements for dissertation research, surveys would be filled out before and after the seven-week program to assess the impact in our level of social support, spiritual support and compassionate love.

Because I actively look for opportunities to grow in my faith, when I received the e-mail, I was very excited about the wonderful opportunity. My family and I had recently joined a newly formed parish in Hunterdon County, NJ, that is in the process of purchasing land to build our own Byzantine-style church. In the meantime, God has graciously provided us with a hospitable site at the Allerton Methodist Church. Due

to limitations of space and access, however, many of our parish programs are still in the early stages. The Agape Circle program promised to fulfill a spiritual need in our parish without depleting limited resources. Because it is a ready-made program, it was apparent to me that Agape Circle could easily be implemented. With the blessing of our priest and Metropolis Chancellor Fr. George Nikas, I contacted Dcn. Markos and volunteered to serve as

an Agape Circle facilitator.

I began advertising the program in our Sunday bulletin and talked to many parishioners. In spite of busy fall schedules, by the grace of God, a group of ten interested parishioners was formed. Since our group was a bit larger than the desired size, Dcn. Markos worked with us to adapt the program to meet our needs. We simply divided the group into two for the dialogue portion of our meetings. This allowed everyone to have more time to share with the group each week.

In the fall of 2007, we began Agape Circle with great enthusiasm. We were very curious about how it would work. Initially, the firm structure seemed a little awkward. We were required to pause for moments of silence between speaking, to allow us time to assimilate what had been shared and to pray for the person who had spoken. Each person was to be

given equal time, and it was up to each of us to decide whether we wished to receive feedback from the group. Although it took some getting used to, we gradually realized that this very structure allowed us the freedom to delve much more deeply into our personal spiritual journeys than we otherwise would have done. Somehow, knowing that there were boundaries and time limits made it easier for us to share and confide in one another without ever feeling unsafe or “over-exposed.”

During the sessions we looked into our hearts, examined our faith and opened up to one another and to God. Through this process, we developed a much closer bond with one other and learned new ways to increase agape in our relationships within and outside our Circle. Each week we would laugh, cry, break bread and share our struggles and triumphs on the journey with Christ and one another to salvation.

For me Agape Circle began as a thirst to grow and learn more about Orthodoxy, but the reality of what it became was far more than I anticipated. It provided the opportunity for all of us to relate in a way we never had before. Unlike on Sundays when we put on our “Sunday best,” Agape Circle allowed us to let our hair down and reveal our vulnerabilities, hopes and dreams to one another and to ourselves. I realized that we are not always as “put together” as we typically present ourselves on Sundays. The truth is, we all struggle in our walk with the Lord through the peaks and valleys of life. Paradoxically, strength does not come from putting on appearances but from acknowledging our weakness, leaning on the Lord’s strength and relying on one another in honest fellowship and mutual spiritual support. The Lord has provided us with the Body of Christ—the Church—so that we can encourage, support and help each other grow in agape as our Lord commanded. It really brought home the Orthodox teaching that we are not saved alone, but in communion. Agape Circle provided the opportunity for a couple of hours a week to break away from our daily busyness and reconnect with the deeper meaning of it all: eternal life in Christ.

Just as we all plug in our cell phones regularly to recharge them, Agape Circle let us plug our hearts into the Source of Life, our heavenly Father. Together with the Divine Liturgy, which we all participate in weekly, the small-group meetings

strengthened our faith and spiritual support for one another as we pressed forward in our respective challenges in life. It nudged us to move beyond our normal comfort zone, calling us to reach out to someone in need, to forgive someone who has hurt us, to ask forgiveness from someone whom we have wronged. Occasionally, these prescribed weekly challenges might have been a bit more than we were ready for, and that was OK. Everything in Agape Circle was optional and voluntary.

To put it simply, Agape Circle was a life-changing experience! We were all sad as the program came to a close. We all knew, though, that we would never lose the ground we had covered together. We had shared our hearts and created memories that would last; we had grown in koinonia and agape.

A few weeks after the fall course ended, we were all thrilled to learn that Dcn. Markos was to begin working with Dr. Anton Vrame, the director of the Department of Religious Education of the Archdiocese, to develop a Pre-Lenten Agape Circle Course. This course would incorporate all the great features of the fall course—prayer, readings, dialogue questions—plus “homework” readings from two Lenten books, *The Lenten Spring* by Fr. Thomas Hopko and *Great Lent* by Fr. Alexander Schmemmann, as well as weekly online video presentations by Fr. Alkiviadis Calivas. Additionally, we had an opportunity to chat online with other participants in other parishes of the



Archdiocese. So, after the winter holidays, our Agape Circle resumed with the majority of the original members, plus two new participants. Once again, the curriculum proved to be wonderful. We met for five weeks and again grew in koinonia and agape as we prepared for the special season of Great Lent and, ultimately, Holy Week and Pascha.

I am thankful to God, to Dcn. Markos, and to the Department of Religious Education for bringing the Agape Circle small groups and the Adult Religious Education Distance Learning Program to fruition. I look forward to the upcoming Agape Circle courses.

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*Angela Ferreira is a member and Agape Circle group leader at the Greek Orthodox parish of Hunterdon County, Flemington, NJ.*