

SMALL COMMUNITIES OF FAITH

by Rev. Donald J. Planty

REFLECTIONS

They devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life¹, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers. Acts 2:42

At the beginning of the Church, when it was still small, Christians gathered in intimate communities in homes to live the new Way (Acts 22:4), founded on four pillars: the prophetic proclamation of truth of the faith (“the teaching of the apostles”); the priestly celebration of the beauty of grace in the sacraments, especially in the Eucharist (“the breaking of the bread”); the service of shepherding one another in the goodness of charity (“the communal life”); and, fostering union with God and with one another in prayer (“the prayers”).

Indeed, Christianity is essentially a communal faith: the faith is taught, passed on in community; the faith is celebrated in the communal liturgy; the faith is lived in communal charity; and, prayers are offered in communion. In fact, we come to know the truth, beauty and goodness of God in communion with others. This is because the communion of love of the Three Persons of the Most Blessed Trinity is shared with each human person through his or her communion of love with Jesus through the Church, in which all are united in communion with one another—in which many distinct persons are united by the same Spirit of Jesus which they have received; they are distinct members but one Mystical Body of Christ.

The basic unit of communion in the Church is the family, the intimate “domestic Church.” Families are then united in communion with other families through parishes (modern descendants of the early home churches) established by the Church to bring Christians together in faith, in worship, in charity and in prayer. (To avoid insularity and separation, parishes are united with other parishes in dioceses in communion with their bishops, and dioceses are united with the universal Church in communion with the Bishop of Rome.) With the growth of the Church and the current, large size of parishes (and of other, similar faith communities, like college campus ministries, etc.) a sense of intimacy in the faith community—of truly knowing one another, sharing the foundations of the faith, and being mutually supported on the pilgrimage of faith—is easily lost; and, on some level, unity is weakened as well.

That intimate unity can be strengthened through a small community of faith (SCF) bound by faith, worship, charity and prayer. These groups are typically single-sex though with regular opportunities for members of various groups to meet. The experience of communal life in a small community of faith formed by the four pillars constitutive of any Christian community—that is, the experience of making the Christian journey in intimate communion with others—better enables each member to grow in faith, hope and love. Small communities of faith may have particular charisms which they wish to live and in which they wish to grow. Small communities of faith avoid insularity and become leaven in the larger community through an openness to formation, worship, charity and prayer with other small communities of faith and with the larger community.

¹ Communal life: koinonia (Greek); communio (Latin)

THE FOUR PILLARS

The authenticity of any small community of faith depends on the four pillars or essential elements of Christian community, of the Church, being present. Following are some concrete recommendations for constituting such communities. Small communities of faith (SCF's) live:

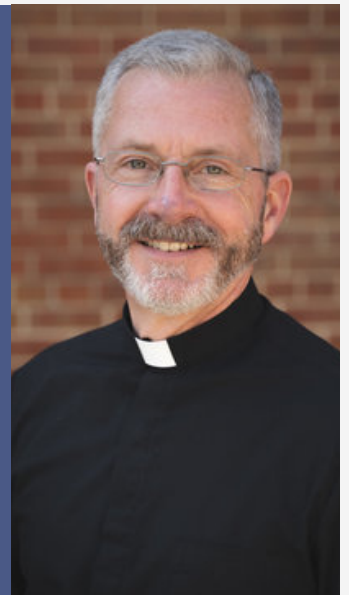
<p>TEACHING OF THE APOSTLES</p>  <p>INTEGRAL FORMATION</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Regular formation in the faith in general (e.g. a Bible or other book study, an online course, etc.)• Regular formation in “faith communion,” in fraternal charity, in particular• Regular integral formation (spiritual, intellectual, psychological, social, physical)
<p>BREAKING OF THE BREAD</p>  <p>LITURGICAL CELEBRATION</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Members of SCF's regularly celebrate the Eucharist together<ul style="list-style-type: none">◦ Attend Mass on the Lord's Day and/or on another day◦ Communal adoration of the Most Blessed Sacrament• Members are committed to the regular practice of the Sacrament of Penance• Consider inaugurating the community with a blessing/dedication that could be renewed annually
<p>COMMUNAL LIFE</p>  <p>FRATERNAL CHARITY</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• SCF's generally gather weekly for their basic group meetings.• Members regularly share fraternal meals, and enjoy other community recreation• Members regularly do some communal work of charity, or volunteering• Members may have “accountability partners” for mutual support outside the group
<p>PRAYER</p>  <p>UNITY IN PRAYERS</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• SCF's incorporate communal prayer into their meetings, involving both an objective element (the inspired Word of God in Sacred Scripture) and a subjective element (personal prayers of adoration, praise, thanksgiving, contrition and supplication/intercession)• Communal prayer may involve song, which is “praying twice”• Members may go an annual retreat or day(s) of recollection together

PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

- **Covenant.** It is helpful to draw up a community “covenant” which explains the community. This may include a name, charism, and goals for living the four pillars explained above. See our Community Covenant Template for help.
- **Name.** The SCF may have its own name, ideally a biblical word or a term from Christian tradition.
- **Leadership.** Every community should have a leader or co-leaders, approved by the pastor or his representative. The group may also choose a mentor who helps shepherd the community (e.g. a priest).
- **Openness.** While intimate unity within SCF’s is encouraged, any semblance of exclusivity is to be avoided; rather, the group should be leavened in their parish and community, and foster communion and activities with other SCF’s, with their parish, with their diocese, and with the universal Church.
- **Size.** It is recommended that communities have no more than thirteen members in order to foster unity, mutual knowledge and intimate friendship.
- **Growth.** Groups grow through the invitation of new members, but then split when reaching more than thirteen members. Community members ought to be developed and called upon by the appropriate authority to lead or to help establish new communities.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Father Planty has served as Pastor of St. Charles Borromeo Catholic Church in Arlington, Virginia since 2014. While there, he has helped to build and promote a vibrant and fruitful small-group ministry for hundreds of young adults and other faithful. Prior to his time at St. Charles, Father Planty studied for and received a J.C.D. (Doctor of Canon Law) degree from the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome, writing his dissertation on "The Law of the Church and the Building of Churches: Canon 1216 and Sacred Architecture." He served in the diplomatic service of the Holy See at the Secretariat of State in Vatican City, and at the Apostolic Nunciatures in Cairo, Egypt, and in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. In addition, for four years was Head Chaplain of Christendom College in Front Royal, Virginia.



Fill out the Community Covenant below. Use the St. Charles Small Communities of Faith document for further explanation of each pillar.

**TEACHING OF THE APOSTLES**

INTEGRAL FORMATION

How will our group grow in faith formation (spiritual, intellectual, psychological, social, physical)?

**BREAKING OF THE BREAD**

LITURGICAL CELEBRATION

How will our group commit to celebration of the Sacraments?

**COMMUNAL LIFE**

FRATERNAL CHARITY

How will our group commit to building authentic friendship?

**PRAYER**

UNITY IN PRAYERS

How will our group commit to establishing a thriving prayer life?