

“Bethany Houses” for Our Time

By His Eminence Metropolitan Saba (Isper)

I was compelled to travel earlier than planned, before the meeting of the Holy Antiochian Synod in October of last year (2025), to Lebanon in order to attend to several personal matters. During that time, I was given the opportunity to stay for a period in a retreat house belonging to one of our monasteries there. From it, I would go out to attend to the matters that had brought me, and then return.

That period granted me something I deeply needed: inner calm, through intensified prayer, reading, and walking in nature. I have long emphasized the importance of spiritual retreats. Although my retreat was in a sense forced and mixed with necessary obligations, I nonetheless experienced its benefit, both spiritually and physically.

The Orthodox tradition is well acquainted with frequenting monasteries. Traditionally, spiritual retreats in the Orthodox world consist of spending a few days in a monastery, during which the believer follows the monastery’s daily cycle of prayers. In addition, the elder or abbess assigns a personal rule that includes spiritual reading, a prayer rule, and work.

Since monasteries are unable to receive all the faithful, many parishes in recent years have turned to organizing group spiritual retreats—whether in monasteries, parishes, or nearby suitable locations—where participants spend one or more days in an atmosphere of prayer, reading, spiritual conversation, and shared life. These retreats help people recover something of a return to themselves, granting inner peace and allowing them to taste the joy of Christian fellowship within the family of Christ.

The contemporary human being lives under mounting tension caused by the accelerating pace of daily life and its pressures. Long working hours, economic strain, exhausting commutes, consumerist lifestyles, and constant preoccupation with livelihood concerns—along with many other factors—have led to exhaustion, frayed nerves, loss of inner balance, mental confusion, and depression that has become one of the most widespread illnesses of our age. Medical statistics indicate that sedatives are among the most commonly sold medications.

All of this requires that the Church not limit herself to preaching and teaching alone, but that she accompany them with renewed pastoral ministry and care for the human person, both collectively and individually. This need is one of the reasons behind my call to revive the ministry of the diaconate in our Archdiocese. At the Archdiocese Convention in 2023, I also called for the revival of prayer groups in parishes and spoke briefly about retreat houses.

People today need the Church's help in organizing short or extended spiritual retreats, taking into account small groups—no more than twenty participants—in quiet, natural settings close to the parish, both to reduce costs and to encourage those with limited means to participate. Participants spend the day in common, quiet prayer. The program should include times for silence, spiritual reading, shared Gospel reflection, discussion around spiritual texts or sayings, as well as silent walks in nature accompanied by the Jesus Prayer.

Such a retreat should not be spiritually burdensome, financially costly, nor merely a recreational activity. The modern person, worn down by nervous strain, needs a period of rest—a kind of spiritual, psychological, and even physical convalescence. Secular spiritual organizations are already offering such programs and workshops. This is all the more reason, then, for the Church to make this ministry one of her top priorities—if we truly desire, and we must desire, to seek the salvation of humanity, for whose sake God became incarnate. Is not salvation the very mission of the Church?

We must not content ourselves with offices for administrative and spiritual appointments alone. I say repeatedly to our priests: I do not want you to be managers of religious enterprises; I want you to be spiritual fathers and shepherds of souls. We must nourish the contemporary human person and help him deepen his life and personal relationship with God. In Christ alone does one find the meaning and purpose of life, and through Him discover the true joy for which the heart longs. A Church whose members do not taste the joy of Christ, purity of life, lived love, and mutual support remains nothing more than a religious association. Christ did not come to establish an association—even a religious one. He did not found a religion; He offered a way of life. The Church is His Body, and His Body is always alive. The Church is a living, vibrant organism, overflowing with life.

When I was Metropolitan of the Archdiocese of Hauran, by God's grace I was able to acquire a house in one of the most beautiful regions of Syria and transform it into a retreat house, which I named "Bethany House." Did not Christ Himself go to Bethany to His friends, Lazarus and his sisters, to find rest with them? I intended it to be a place of spiritual, psychological, and restorative renewal for the sons and daughters of that archdiocese who were exhausted by the ongoing war. Very quickly, however, it became a destination sought by believers from various archdioceses. How I wish that some capable and generous faithful would take the initiative to establish retreat houses—"Bethany Houses"—for the people of our Archdiocese here in North America.

I dream that in the near future we will have retreat houses in many areas of the Archdiocese, places our faithful can visit to spend days of joy in the presence of God and one another. In this way, we encourage one another to choose the "good portion" that will not be taken away from us. Encourage one another to provide the Archdiocese with retreat houses—for yourselves and for your children after you.