

The Teacher Does Not Retire

By Metropolitan Saba Isper

Dedicated to Metropolitan George Khodr, March 12, 2018

His Eminence Metropolitan Saba is resharing this tribute to His Eminence Metropolitan George Khodr (upon his retirement from archpastoral ministry in 2018) on the occasion of his 101st birthday on July 6, 2024.

O Antiochian light, we thank God for sending you to His Church, so that its people may know its hidden splendor and its radiance that calls the people of God. Had you not been present in the past eight decades, the light of Christ would not have shone as brightly in it as it does today. You have spent your lifetime, since its blossoming, in the service of the Incarnate Word, bringing salvation, compassion, and love to humanity. You have passionately loved the Crucified One Who rose from the dead for your sake and ours. You sought after Him, driven by overwhelming love and unshakable certainty that He is the Savior, and that He alone is worthy of worship and of our whole hearts and beings.

In the blossoming of our youth, as my generation and I oscillated between culture and faith, you were the shining example of the possibility of combining both, and of how culture sparkles with life and beauty when illuminated by Christ's light. You rescued us at that time from the clutches of atheism and made us love the Church of Christ which we had perceived as no more than a dusty museum or, at best, a place suitable for the poor and elderly. Through you, we learned that it is the cradle of true life and the source of eternal youth, and that Christ alone is "the way, the truth, and the life" for all generations and all times.

You lived, as you said, captivated by divine love, and you stated: "The believer is either passionately in love or he is nothing." You restored many people's confidence in the Church and its pastors. Your passion for Christ enabled you to find contentment in Him alone, freeing yourself from all earthly bonds, even the good ones. How could you have stayed in the world with its problems and crises, without your eyes being never distracted from the Lord? You used to enchant us with Him when you cast His light upon every earthly thing, transforming it into something heavenly! You often used the expression "earthly dust kneaded with the light of Christ" because you experienced firsthand how your own earthly dust was transformed after being engulfed with His light again. The Lord chose to spread His

radiance to us from your earthly dust. He entrusted you to convey His splendors to the ends of the earth, and you were a faithful apostle.

Would you have combined in your eyes the gentleness of a child and the sharpness of a falcon if God had not granted you abundant intelligence so that you, in turn, could give him the purity of your heart? And because you have unified in your person, by His divine grace, the earthly with the heavenly, you became able to reflect the abundance of His splendor and beauties, and to lead even those who reject your Lord to respect Him and those who scorn His Church to change their perspective.

I did not understand, nor did some of my friends, the secret of your passion for Christ until your eyes once gleamed with a joy that is not from this world, when one of our colleagues asked you, "I read you attentively and notice that you use the word Christ so often that I even tried to replace it with the word God in many places, and I saw that the meaning did not change." You exclaimed joyfully, as if he had discovered a secret, and said: "Precisely, because no one comes to the Father except through Him."

You enriched us beyond measure. How we awaited your articles and sermons and eagerly received them to rejoice in the sweetness of your Jesus that you conveyed to us. No one taught like you. No one dared like you to smash the idols that often obscured the face of the Lord, even in the heart of His Church.

Your desire to illuminate the world with the light of your Christ made you unafraid to wade through the mire because you had great faith that it would turn into light when it met the Lord. You would come to us, leaning on His chest like the beloved John, to infuse us with the warmth of His heart and refresh our souls with the nectar of His life-giving fragrance. I do not believe that your intelligence and your culture alone are what enriched us with all that came from you, in your verbal and written teachings. No, your constant prostration at the Lord's feet, your attachment to Him, and the outpouring of His grace in you made your human capabilities convey Him with the splendor that you personally experienced in Him.

You engaged in dialog with the young and old, those who shared your convictions, those who opposed them, and those who rejected them. Your equal respect for all did not wane. You bore all the flaws of humanity, being patient with your flock, with the sinner until he repents and with the wicked in the hope of awakening any good

within them. Only stupidity you could not tolerate, for your voice would rise high against it. Was it because you understood its great danger, for it hides the light of Christ from the world? You showed kindness to the sinner and reprimanded him at times for the sake of his repentance, but how would the foolish know the gravity of their actions if not confronted?

Do you know, O great one, that your greatness lies in all of this? With all the gifts and talents God bestowed upon you, you did not confine His Church within yourself, but left much freedom to your disciples, so that the Spirit of the Lord would have ample space to transform them.

I once came to you, anxious about the situation of my small archdiocese and saddened by the stifling of my capabilities in it. You advised me to focus on the quality of my service, not its quantity. You said, "We in the Church are shepherds of souls first and foremost." No words have comforted me as much as yours; you have shown me the way with these words. Now, after years of service to the Church, I am sure that no one could say what you said unless he had internally struggled for the salvation of his flock, because he loved extremely.

How great you are, with a diamond eloquent tongue. Your greatness extends beyond knowledge and culture. It lies in your humility and love, and your unwavering heart turned forever toward your Lord. Because of this towering stature, you reached every corner, bowing only before your Lord.

Today, having passed the age of ninety-five, the frailty of human nature relieves you from pastoral burdens and the Church's concerns. Yet, you remain a blessing to the Antiochian Church and in perpetual prayer for it. In its crises, it stands at crossroads, yearning for persons like you. Today, you dedicate your time to praying for it. Pray that it may not obscure the Lord's face to His people with scandals, limitations, or stupidity. Pray, Your Eminence, so that many within it allow the Lord to illuminate the face of this world through them.

You remain, O teacher, as you have given, taught, and written.