

Your Grace Transforms the Universe, Part Three

By Metropolitan Saba (Isper)

Distinguishing between Evil and Good

The human world today tends to accept the disease and change its name, in its quest to embrace the sick. Orthodox Christianity distinguishes between sickness and the patient, between wickedness and the wicked, between the sin and the sinner. It is called upon to liberate the wicked man from his wickedness and to free the sinner from his sin. It is aware that evil lies not in the matter itself but, rather, in one's attitude towards this matter; it lies in the will of man. Accepting the disease with the patient makes the patient worse. Compassion is for the fallen person, not for the fall itself. In order to cure patients from their illness, we must identify the illness and name it.

Orthodox Christian theology unleashes the energies that can transform this world back into what it was made to be. Orthodox theology must be the inspiration for movements of love, peace, service, non-discrimination, alleviating injustice, and caring for the environment—not influenced by movements of a merely human nature.

Christ came to save the world, to establish the earth as a heaven, not to establish a system limited to the parameters of mere earthly life.

The misery of the world, rich and poor alike—spiritual and material misery, which is constantly being exacerbated—is only a sign that Christians have not been sufficiently transfigured by the Holy Spirit, so that the world might be transfigured by them. Olivier Clement says, “If some people become prayer—that is, pure prayer that transcends all measures of the criteria of this world—then they transform the universe by their mere presence, by their mere existence.”

Church and Joy

There is another thing that the Church should be aware of: the desired joy, the joy of life in Christ. Christianity began by declaring joy: “I announce to you a great joy, that today a Savior has been born to you and he is Christ the Lord” (Luke 2:11). Christianity, since its inception, was a declaration of the only possible joy on earth.

Christianity announced a new, all-encompassing joy, turning the end into a beginning, death into life. It is not possible to understand Christianity without

proclaiming this joy. And, since the Church is joy—only joy—it has triumphed in the world. But let us remember that every time it loses this joy, it will inevitably lose the world and will lose its testimony in it. Every time its joy becomes a worldly joy rather than the fruit of the Holy Spirit, it spoils its flavor and loses its taste, which the world needs but is unaware of; then the Church becomes null and void.

Is the Church aware today of the following words of Fr. Alexander Schmemmann, which are a contemporary echo of Christ's words? "The Church is in the world but not of the world, because only by *not* being of the world can it reveal and manifest the 'world to come,' the beyond" (*For the Life of the World*). Only Christianity can restore this world to come—the lost world, yet at the same time the desired one. An extended pause for reflection is required here, because a comprehensive change of prevailing notions is required.

Comfort or Life?

How can we restore the realm of the Heavenly Kingdom—where "there is no sorrow, death, or sighing"—while we are affected by a debilitating secularism that strips our Christianity of its substantial mystical quality and turns it into a mere sector or domain among several sectors or domains of man's needs, even if we call it a "spiritual sector"? Freedom from the influence of contemporary secularism is one of the most important priorities of the Church in today's world. This is the spirit that has prevailed in the world, starting from the formerly Christian world and spreading from it to all countries.

Contemporary secularism seeks human comfort, while true Christianity seeks human life. Contemporary secularism reconciles people with death and presents it as a natural end to a normal life, whereas Christianity is not a reconciliation with death but a revelation of death, and it is able to reveal death because it is a revelation of life. Christ is this life. "Only if Christ is Life," quoting Father Alexander Schmemmann, "is death what Christianity proclaims it to be, namely, the enemy to be destroyed, and not a 'mystery' to be explained" (*For the Life of the World*).

Church Expatriation

The Church is a divine institution that comes from above and is directed upwards. Its message is to raise the world to where and how it originally was.

The Church, while caring for the world, tends to come down to its measure. Many times, it overlooks, with good intentions, the fact that it has become the world's size. When, as it deals with human beings, it forgets that they are fallen, then it abandons its most sacred message—that is, salvation.

Today, the spirit of world secularism poses a threat to the Church. The secular achievements are undoubtedly attractive. Father Giovanni Martini described his Catholic Church after the Second Vatican Council, with all its positive aspects, with prophetic words. He said, “The post-Council Church lost its mystical face, and it became the Church of permanent dialogue, organizations, consultations, conferences, councils, committees, academies, parties, blocs of influence on public opinion, jobs, structures and reconstruction, social experiments, and statistics. Thus, the church became more than ever, the human church, that is, an entity without an identity.”

To trust that life is truly with and in Christ is not a new requirement, but let us trust that Christ alone is sufficient for the world to have life, as we really believe. Then our sole trust in money, science, and technology becomes invalid; and they, in turn, become no more than servants of the message of Christ.

We should not forget that, according to the expression of Saint Paul the Apostle, we as Christians must be “as unknown, yet well-known; as dying, yet behold we live; as punished, yet not put to death; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, yet possessing all things” (2 Cor. 6:9–10).

Our world talks a lot about God. God is often the subject of dissection and analysis, an idea, an ideology; and consequently, the face of God is absent—God the Life, the Father, God who cares for His people and carries them on eagles' wings. Isn't the Bible currently being taught as a book of literature or culture in many theological schools? Aren't there many theological books that present Christianity as an intellectual philosophy that only certain intellectuals are aware of? Saint Sophrony Sakharov talks about this subject, saying, “The long-standing experience of scientific theology has convincingly demonstrated that a person can obtain a thorough understanding of scientific theology without having a living faith, that is, in his or her ignorance of God.”

Do we live what we have spoken of—that the universe manifests Christ through us or via our mediation—without restoring our fallen passions to their original

position? How do we restore the world to God if we do not restore our souls to Him first?

The Orthodox Church persistently asks for repentance. It realizes that repentance is a change of mind that leads to awakening. To repent means to remain vigilant. The awakened person is the one who does not surrender to dreams aimlessly, under the influence of fleeting impulses. The awakened person is the one who has a meaning, a direction, a goal. He knows where he is and where he is going.

To be alert is to be present where we are. We live in the reality of the present. We do not become nostalgic for the past, and we do not get distracted and disturbed by desires for the future. It is what Paul Evdokimov says: “The present hour in which you live, the person you meet here and now, and the task you are doing at this moment are the most important issues in your life.”

This permanent repentance inevitably leads to both purification of the soul and purification at the bodily level, simultaneously. The Orthodox Church emphasizes the spiritual effectiveness of bodily ascetic practices because it looks at Creation in its entirety and at the same time asks to restore it in its entirety to the Kingdom from which it had fallen.

The Last Offering

When Christians present the world to God after its liberation from the effects of the fall, they present themselves along with it, realizing the presence of God in matter and beyond all matter. They do not accept the fallen world on its own terms because they know that our relationship with God’s Creation has been distorted by sin and we will not rediscover its fundamental sacred character until our hearts are purified.

When we are cleansed, our hearts are filled with the love of God, rather than with overflow of emotions that are subject to changing influences. At that point, we understand the words of Father Zosima in the novel *The Brothers Karamazov*, when he was questioned about resorting to force or to humble love, especially in the face of sin. He advises, “Do not resort except to this love, this love that subjugates the entire world. Humanity that is filled with love is a marvelous force, unlike any other force.”

This teaching was originally printed for the 56th biennial Archdiocese Convention in July of 2023.