

The Christian Approach to Crises, Part Two *An Interview with Metropolitan Saba (Isper)*

Question: In your book "Words from the Heart," page 63, you say, "The weakness of a family's spiritual life makes it more fragile and prone to fracturing by any blow." To what extent should we focus on developing spirituality in human life, especially in the family, so that it becomes able to avoid crises?

Answer: The spiritual weakness of the family is unfortunately the core of its problem. All or most of the attention is focused on raising children for what is believed to be the best upbringing for earthly life: food, sports, study, etc. Neglected is the spiritual or other-worldly dimension; and I mean by that how the Christian lives on this earth in order to continue his full life in the kingdom of heaven. This, which we call "eschatological theology," is often absent, and we need this to focus on raising our children from childhood.

I had the blessing of meeting the monk Paisios (+1994), who was declared a saint in 2015. I visited him in his hermitage in 1988, and I asked him some questions, including this question: "How can a Christian live the existential repentance that the Church Fathers talk about? We often repent intellectually. When I sin, I realize on the level of the intellect, but not with my entire being, that I have sinned and committed an act or thought that is inappropriate. So, I address God and ask for forgiveness and promise not to repeat the mistake and I strive not to repeat it. But I do all this only on the intellectual level. How can I live it on the level of the being, I mean that repentance full of tears that changes the human heart from within?"

He smiled at me, and his answer was shocking. He asked me if my parents, during my childhood, prayed before and after eating. I was surprised and said to my translator friend, maybe he didn't understand the question, or maybe you didn't translate it accurately. Saint Paisios answered him before he conveyed my clarification, saying that, in fact, he understood my question, but he asked his question because, if a person did not grow up in a pious house where the parents will not eat or do anything without prayer, it is very difficult to reach this high level which he seeks.

From here we realize the importance of the home. Everything that a person gains from virtue or vice, he learns from the home. Therefore, spiritual education is very important.

Q: Jesus tells us in the Gospel of John (16:20): "Truly, truly, I say to you, you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice; you will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy." The pivotal question we aim to explore is: What do the Church and Jesus Christ offer to the suffering human being?

A: They offer a lot. First and foremost, they share in the suffering. This notion might be unsettling to some, given the prevalent belief that our Lord is exalted above all things. However, "God is love" (1 John 4:8), and genuine love empathizes and feels the beloved. God endures suffering alongside humanity, albeit in a manner that transcends our comprehension. This perspective isn't a personal conjecture but originates from Saint Maximus the Confessor of the seventh century. Many contemporary theologians, seeking answers to the afflictions, predicaments, conflicts, famines, and tragedies of our times have discovered profound wisdom in his teachings.

Our faith centers on the crucified and risen Christ—simultaneously suffering and triumphant. As one modern theologian describes it, the face of Jesus is "bloodied and risen." Human beings extract energy from pain, if they face it with a living faith, love for the Lord, and a serious pursuit of the salvation of themselves and the society in which they live. God guides individuals to discern a purpose in the heart of their suffering, a calling that they would not have been able to discover without pain. While many have undergone such transformative journeys, it necessitates a robust, loving relationship with God, transcending mere rational faith in His existence.

Transitioning beyond the intellectual realm of faith is imperative. This doesn't advocate for irrationality but emphasizes moving beyond mere belief to an experiential and lived faith. This is the essence of a living faith.

Allow me to share an extraordinary story about a lady from my former parish during my tenure as a priest. A widow, she raised her four children amidst numerous challenges, all the while displaying profound love for the Lord. Tragically, each of her children departed from this world prematurely. Following the loss of her last son, a friend visited her and noticed the lingering scent of incense in her home. With a tone of reproach, the friend asked, "Do you continue to burn incense after losing all your children?" Her response was resolute: "Even if He (Jesus) abandoned

me, I would not abandon Him." This epitomizes a living faith. Therefore, the cultivation of spiritual education is of paramount importance.

Q: What is the root cause of crises?

A: Sin. Human sin invariably serves as the cause, as evil is the offspring of sin. As articulated in the Bible: "When sin is fully grown, it gives birth to death" (James 1:15b). A crisis emerges as an accumulation of sins, errors, and evils. Therefore, a reduction in sins corresponds to a reduction in crises. In essence, this dynamic operates on various levels—personal, public, group, cultural, and state.

Q: In the biblical account of the man born blind (John 9:1-38), Jesus is questioned about whether the man's blindness is a consequence of his parents' sin. Jesus clarifies that the man's blindness is not a result of parental sin but serves as an opportunity for the manifestation of God's power through the man. What does this statement signify?

A: It is crucial to grasp the concept of the power of God in this context. Contrary to the common belief that divine power here lies in God's ability to either cause blindness or restore sight, Jesus intends to demonstrate God's glory through healing. In essence, Jesus, in this significant and delicate exchange, provides not a logical answer but a pragmatic one: addressing the suffering of a human being and expressing His mission to remove pain and bring forth life.

His Eminence gave this interview to "Radio Kifo" of the Syriac Orthodox Church.