

Questions and Thoughts

By Metropolitan Saba (Isper)

Saint Paisios of Mount Athos often counseled those who asked about the Antichrist to focus instead on Christ—to live with Him and in Him—rather than wasting time, stirring fears, and exhausting their strength speculating about the Antichrist and the timing of his coming. This is the teaching of the truly enlightened: they direct their gaze on what nurtures life in God rather than on distractions that breed anxiety.

Religious instruction and spiritual formation are inseparable. We do not learn the truths of faith merely to accumulate information but to live by them. Faith is not the collection of facts about God; it is the living knowledge of Him, reflected in how we think, act, and shape our lives.

For this reason, the righteous play a central role in religious formation, which, like every form of education, has its concerns and challenges. Too often, however, it has been reduced to rigid literalism, distorting the true image of faith. To believe that God is just and a judge is one thing; to make His judgment a veil that obscures His love is something else entirely.

God is unlike any created being. He remains a divine mystery, beyond the full grasp of our minds—minds limited by time, space, and mortality. Yet humanity can sense His presence and receive His revelation through divine touches that stir the longing soul.

Christian doctrine is not the product of human philosophical analysis but the human expression of divine revelation—what we call the salvific economy of God—which reached its fulfillment in Jesus Christ. After Christ's ascension, the Holy Spirit continued to guide the Church through those enlightened by Him, preserving its integrity and guarding it from error.

Over the centuries, this faith was enshrined in the creeds—concise statements formulated to safeguard right belief and authentic Christian life, particularly in response to heresies. Christian teaching began with the Twelve Apostles and, as we see in the homilies of Peter and Paul in the Acts of the Apostles, was first centered on the death and resurrection of Christ for the salvation of the world.

Yet religious instruction has not been free from shortcomings. The greatest danger lies in its decline across history—caused by many factors—where devotion has often strayed from the essence of faith, reducing religion to social custom, cultural tradition, or mechanical practice. Such distortions not only obscure the truth but also foster a mentality that professes religion while undermining its very heart.

This raises serious questions. How can a believer embrace the heights of spiritual faith while clinging to concepts and values that contradict it? How deeply are religious values, as they are lived, shaped by local mentality, social customs, and prevailing culture? Do we not often confuse religious conviction with social conditioning, failing to distinguish between them? How can one correct a flawed religious upbringing? How can faith form open and fearless minds when society itself nurtures fear?

People in every religion exhibit conservative, liberal, and moderate streams. Why? Because people understand and live their faith differently. Does the perspective of a believer raised in a society that values equal treatment of men and women resemble that of someone from a culture that suppresses women's dignity and freedom? Is the sense of sin regarding lying the same for someone from a society that sees lying as a grave vice as for one raised where "a man's charm is in his lies"?

From this perspective, the Church must give religious formation the place it deserves. History shows that religious instruction has often been entangled with cultural elements that used religion merely to validate themselves. Yet education, in its essence, is simply a channel for transmitting truth, not an end in itself.

In the past, education often relied more on punishment than encouragement, more on coercion than freedom, seeking to control lives rather than cultivate discernment. Religious practice was shaped by this mentality, portraying God primarily as a source of punishment. Many grew up trying merely to appease divine wrath and avoid disobedience, not out of love for God but out of fear of eternal fire. Consequently, many abandoned faith altogether, rejecting the distorted image of God they had been taught.

Too often, religious education has instilled fear of God rather than love for Him—warning against sin rather than inspiring hearts not to wound His love. God thus became a tool in the hands of institutions, including religious ones, to mold people according to purposes unrelated to His true nature or the salvation and flourishing of His people.

True awareness of sin begins not with fear but with a vision of the beauty of a sinless life. There is a profound difference between avoiding an act solely because it is forbidden and disregarding it because one longs for something infinitely higher. The Law of the Old Testament was based on prohibition, but Christ brought the Law of Love, which calls us to surpass vice in pursuit of the highest good. Tragically, those who remain bound to mere prohibition live more by their old nature than their new one, for the love of God has yet to claim them fully.

Both institutions and individuals have often clung to the letter of sacred texts while neglecting to seek their deeper meaning—sometimes for motives far removed from God. This has led to distortions of fundamental truths, replacing them with misconceptions or even opposites.

What is needed is guidance from those illumined by divine light—those who know God personally and existentially. Living among the saints leads us to right vision and true experiential knowledge.

Today, education and human thinking have changed. People are formed in scientific reasoning, logic, and critical inquiry. They are more culturally aware, requiring the Gospel to be presented in a manner faithful to its spirit yet suited to the modern mind. The challenge remains: Are we ready to meet this responsibility?