

The Suffering Church

By Metropolitan Saba (Isper)

The question arises first: Can the Church be described as suffering? The answer is yes and no. No, because the Church is a divine entity, its head is the Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit is present in it without interruption. And yes, because it is a human entity as well, and its members, who are on earth, are sinful human beings, living in a fallen world, and consequently bearing the effects and signs of the Fall, which appear in the weakness of most of them and the sins of all of them.

The Church is a divine-human entity. Because it is divine, you find in it all the possibilities of transcendence, exaltation, and deification; all the energies of God that transform, change, or alter; and all the powers of God that make the impossible natural. Therefore, you find in it great saints who, through their lives, achieved what the average person cannot imagine. You see miracles as natural things, as you see men and women who have become great after being humiliated and have become messengers of peace, mercy, and love, leaving an indelible mark on the history of humanity. Whoever engages in the Church, passionately in love with their Master, will be inhabited by the Holy Spirit, who transforms them into a flame that illuminates those near and far. Whoever lives in the Church in continuous repentance advances from one level to another, until he reaches a peak of perfection that no human being can reach without divine Grace, which rejoices in working in the souls of those who repent, who do not stop at a certain limit but, rather, burn with divine love increasingly.

As for the human aspect of the Church, our theological teachings distinguish the face of the Church Triumphant from the face of the Church Militant, for learning purposes but not in a way that actually separates them. The first includes, in addition to the angels, all human beings who have departed to eternal life, who have completed the phase of struggle and repentance and are now waiting for the final resurrection. The second face includes the believers on earth. These people are still in a state of spiritual struggle, so (hopefully) they are in a sincere pursuit of a life of holiness and righteousness, loyal to their Lord, keeping His commandments, and loving His creation. These people are afflicted with faults, temptations that hinder them, and the worries of living make them forget their primary goal. But they must continue to cling to their Lord, return after an exile

from Him, ceaselessly evaluating and examining themselves in the light of the Gospel, and rising whenever they fall. Their eyes, hearts and minds must remain directed, constantly, to their Christ, who rose from the dead, and to His outpouring of love for His creation, so that they may be filled with hope in Him and this hope may protect them from falling into further despair.

Saint Ephrem the Syrian gave the Church a practical definition, perhaps the most beautiful. He said, "The Church is a group of repentant people." Yes, its believers are sinners, but they know that they were redeemed at an inestimable price, so we find them hastening to repent and start over, whenever they become aware of their distance from the One who redeemed them. Thus, repentance becomes their permanent path.

But repentance is not an automatic or formal act. Repentance is a radical change that affects the person inside and outside. It is, in the words of the Apostle Paul, "forgetting what is behind me and reaching out with all strength to what is before me" (Phil. 3:13). Man abandons not what is good but, rather, what is bad and evil. This requires him to be aware of his faults and evil-doings first, and second, to avoid and abhor them so that he lands on the threshold of true repentance. Realistically, we do not see this prevailing in the Church of Christ. We see it in some believers, but not in everyone. That is why the Church suffers. The Church's suffering comes from the fact that not all Christians seek holiness. Some of them are comfortable with their sins and do not seek change. Among them are those who view the Church as merely a social institution, and act in it and with it as they would with any human institution, thus missing its divine dimension. Some of them subordinate the Church to their personal interests and use their influence there.

We find hot, lukewarm, and cold believers in it. The voice of influential people may speak louder than the voice of the Gospel. It may be used as a tool to serve everything except the salvation of souls. This is from the internal aspect. From the external perspective, it is subject to all kinds of persecution and restrictions. The Church of Christ is in constant war with the spiritual forces of evil, which take various and changing forms, ways and models, and sometimes wear a luminous guise in order to mislead the believers, but their goal is the same: to destroy the Church.

No religious institution has known external and internal persecution as the Church of Christ had. However, it continued to radiate Christ's light everywhere, and its testimony has remained a shining beacon that no one could deny. The Holy Spirit remained its guardian, active in it and present in its many known and unknown witnesses. But the absence of love among its members remains the greatest danger to its children.

The more the war increases against it, the more God provides it with blessings and strength. The more its children sin and become aware of their sin, the more God bestows His grace upon them and raises them up again. As for whoever refuses to love, God refuses to work in them. Apathy is the ultimate betrayal. The absence of love blocks the Church from speaking the name of Christ, estranges it from Him, and makes it a "social gathering," as Metropolitan Georges (Khodr) likes to say. The Church is anything but the Church of Christ if love is absent from its members. Through love, faithfulness to the Lord is embodied, and through it alone the children of the Church are known as disciples of Christ: "By this all will know that you are my disciples" (John 13:35). Hence, love's absence becomes the severest pain for the Church.

Many people may not reject love, but Satan lures them to finding faults in others, and in this manner, they excuse themselves from the labor of love. In addition, reality shows that many do not know how to express their love and are therefore unable to embody it. That is why we see misunderstanding, misinterpretation, and mutual accusations, based on seeing only one aspect of the story as the talk of the hour among her children. This is why faith and integrity must rise above all else, prioritizing prayer and spiritual practices, and therefore putting emphasis on acts of love. A junior or senior official takes his time in work and implementation, while another sees rushing things as more important in a certain circumstance; one person sees a specific solution to an existing problem, another sees it in another way, etc.; and they fight. Instead of the spirit of cooperation, in order to reach integration, the demon of jealousy begins to attack hearts and ignite anger, pitting believers against each other, instead of covering up each other's shortcomings and complementing them. Then the pain will be most intense in the Church of Christ. May God have mercy on us and protect us from everything that causes pain to His Church. My Lord, make us "accept injustice, and protect us from being among the oppressors," as our great saint, Isaac the Syrian, commanded. Amen.