

The Christian Priest

By Metropolitan Saba (Isper)

The priest is an apostle, but he can either be faithful to the gospel or become a mercenary. There is no in between. Christianity is not fundamentally a religion, but a path, a way of life. The priest is a guide on this path. He accompanies the believers on their journey towards God and achieving theosis. He provides them with the divine mysteries which grant them divine grace. He accepts their confession. He guides them, lighting their path. He has compassion on them, as Christ had compassion on the sick, the leper, and the widow, as well as on the crowds, whom he often saw as “sheep without a shepherd” (Matt. 9:36).

The priest is a father, and he is not called "father" for nothing. A father is both a nurturer and an embracer, working for his family. The priest's family is his parish. He nurtures them by visiting them, and by giving communion to their sick and elderly. He may be able to give support to the poor, or he may not. But in either case, he loves them tenderly, and people keenly sense his love and know it to be true. The priest's love for his parishioners leads to their obedience. He is obeyed when he speaks the word of God, not acting on his own whims. His word is heard when his concern is for the salvation and good of his children. If he is a little harsh at times and if he rebukes, the parishioners accept his intention, because they realize that he is moved by love for them.

The priest is a spiritual father first. His role, his job, is to elevate his flock to the heights. With his elevated spirituality, he draws them upward. And like his Master, he does not disdain to reach down to their spiritual level to share in their suffering, and then raise them up – just as Christ became incarnate, lowering himself to raise us up. The priest “rejoices with those who rejoice and weeps with those who weep” (Rom. 12:15). All are his children, and what happens to them concerns him deeply. His service is based on raising them from their reality to a better reality, in which God and His goodwill prevail. In order to succeed, he may need to use “pastoral” methods and approaches that they can accept. He is called upon to deduce what God inspires him to convey the divine word to them. These are means and tools for their spiritual ascent. Otherwise, they have no place in his ministry to his parishioners. Beware of considering these means and tools an end in themselves!

The priest must not lose sight of the goal: the salvation of his people, their holiness, and their adornment with virtues, supporting and assisting them to live up to the Gospel. All pastoral work must serve this goal. Otherwise, the priest will become, God forbid, an agent for an entertainment company. Losing sight of the goal is very easy. Most believers enjoy a priest who suits their taste. Many are disgusted by a priest who demands they follow the Word of God. They want to live as they please. Their priest's goal may be to elevate them, but they want to stay spiritually low, so they pull him down to their level. They make things difficult for him until he submits to their demands.

The priest maintains faithful service when he is a true man of prayer. Changing and saving people is essentially God's work. Only God can soften and heal hearts. A good priest presents his flock to God daily in fervent prayer. A priest, by definition, is one who presents the world to God so that He may sanctify and transfigure it. Frequent celebration of the Divine Liturgy aids the priest. It is unfortunate that most priests today celebrate Divine Liturgy only on Sundays and feast days. This is a great loss! The priests of old, in their simplicity, were aware that they were men of prayer, more so than the priests of today. Their churches were opened daily, morning and evening, for Orthros and Vespers. Today's priests are tempted to be social workers or religious workers rather than men of God.

True, their social service falls within the framework of the service of love, which is the message of Christ and the message of his apostles after him, i.e., the priests. However, the service of Christian love is distinguished from social service, even though the two services intersect in a number of aspects and fields. Christian love embraces the person, without pressure, and is directed towards him as a whole, not limited to merely providing for a specific need. Christian love shares in suffering with the sufferer, and believes that the sufferer is providing an opportunity for the provider to practice Christian love. It focuses on the image of God in the person, and not the person's individuality. This joyful service is only achieved by a special divine grace, which God gives to those who pray, who are well aware that their daily communion with Him is their true provision.

The priest, with the awesome responsibility placed on his shoulders, and in the face of many needs, may try to be satisfied with two or more ministries, and exempt himself from others. Then he adopts the ministries that comfort him, and he may

be oblivious to this mistake. If there is no one to alert him, he gets used to what he is doing, and his conscience no longer reproaches him and demands more from him.

The priest may justify his weak care by saying that his parishioners do not provide for his living conditions. This is possible; not all parishes provide for their priests in an acceptable way. This should push him to give and serve better, relying on his Lord, who feeds the birds of the air, which neither sow nor reap (Matt. 6:26). This increases him in holiness; and seeing his devotion, the Lord must visit him in ways that only He knows. Many are the virtuous priests who experienced this divine visitation when their children neglected them. This is not a justification for the faithful's negligence in caring for their spiritual fathers, but rather a strengthening for fathers, and a reminder to them that they serve God first. And God, who does not forget anyone, will not forget them.

A priest may feel cheated when he compares himself to the richest person in his parish. This is a great demonic temptation for him. All good fathers have experienced that money flees from a priest as much as he runs after it, and comes to him as much as he avoids it.

The priest is both great and small: great, because he is in the image of his Lord, not dwelling on trifling details, but rather transcending them; and small, because he does not disdain to condescend lovingly to the world of sinners, in order to purify them. He is high and lofty, and at the same time very humble and low.

My Lord, make Your priests worthy of Your fulfillment. Support them, console them, encourage them, and give them strength in the face of the many difficulties and trials they face. Enlighten them, my Lord, with Your light, so that they may be fulfilled with You, and may in turn fulfill the world with You.