

## **This is How God's Pure Ones Think**

*By Metropolitan Saba (Isper)*

Father Roman Braga, a confessor of the faith, was born in Romania in 1922 and fell asleep in the Lord in the United States in 2015. Considered by many as a saint, they continually pray for the official announcement of his canonization. He endured a harrowing eleven-year imprisonment in communist Romania, enduring severe physical and psychological torment. Even after his release, he continued to suffer moral persecution until his departure for Brazil in 1968. Patriarch Justinian facilitated Father Braga's departure in order to save him from further harm from law enforcement because of his active involvement in his parish.

Father Braga, released as a deacon, struggled to find employment in various dioceses to make ends meet. Despite facing rejection from some bishops, he harbored no resentment, nor did he hold a grudge against them. Rather, he recognized their fear of persecution that the Church was suffering at the time.

We come to know him more intimately through his book, [\*Exploring the Inner Universe: Joy – The Secret of Life\*](#), which is an extensive interview with him. In this book, he delves into various aspects of his life, the history of the contemporary Orthodox Church in Romania, the spirituality of the Orthodox Church and its people, and many other topics.

I was particularly struck by the purity and clarity of his spirit in some of his responses to the interviewer's questions. The interviewer, also Romanian, posed a lengthy question spanning several pages, criticizing the bishops who compromised with the communist authorities and remained silent about the brutal persecution of Christians in prisons and detention camps solely for their faith and zeal for the church. At that time, the authorities fiercely opposed any grassroots pastoral work, keeping some churches open and allowing high-level theological publications that the general populace did not understand and thus posed no threat. This facade served to show the world that the church was alive while concealing the reality of persecution.

In his critique of the bishops, the journalist indirectly suggests that the grace of God has left the "open" churches and moved to the prisons, where believers endure daily horrors.

Father Roman responds, "I never believed that the Spirit moved from the Romanian Church into the prisons, as you seem to imply in your question. When we were in prison, we would pray that the hierarchs of the church would stay where they were and not come to us, because the Spirit is where the Holy Sacraments are, where the Holy Liturgy takes place, and where the Hours, Vespers, and Matins are read. The Holy Spirit is the life of the Church. Only if we are truly members of the Church, members of the Holy Body of Christ, we are nourished only by the Holy Spirit. The Church cannot exist without its clerical hierarchs. The Church is comprised of the hierarchy, the clergy, and the people. As you cannot mistake the Church for the fault of some individuals, you cannot confuse it for some hierarchs. It is true that the hierarchs made compromises, but they worked to maintain and continuously offer the Holy Sacraments. And the Church could not exist without them. We know this also from the Holy Fathers. You cannot have the Church comprised only of people and no hierarchs" (p. 101).

He continues: "I believe that the Church, at least in Romania and Russia, was strengthened during the Communist persecution. I dare to say that suffering compels individuals to mature, but also the Church. Nikolai Berdyaev, a Christian philosopher, in one of his books, affirms that the Church was strong during the first 300 years of persecution. Later, when Constantine the Great gave freedom to the Christians, the spiritual life of the Church became diluted; the Church was more of an institution than a spiritual reality.

"The same thing happened during Communism: the Church was obligated to limit all her activities to the inside the four walls of the temple. I do not know the situation in other countries, but the Romanian Church today launched a campaign of physical and spiritual reconstruction. Priests are now serving in schools, hospitals, and the army. I'm optimistic; I think that the Romanian Church will contribute in renewing Orthodoxy in the soul of the Romanian nation" (p. 102).

In his answer to the question about the Church's historical state, which witnessed heretical patriarchs and bishops who indulged in their desires, Father Roman says: "To tell you the truth, I am not comfortable with the idea that if the hierarchs are sinful, then the Church no longer exists. Nor am I comfortable with the idea of what is called spiritual elitism. All bishops, without exception, must be free from suspicion and lead exemplary lives. But their failure to do so does not negate the existence of the Church. I do not dare say that if a bishop is personally sinful, the

Spirit of God no longer works in him, because the Holy Spirit always works for the salvation of all people, regardless of the worthiness of those who officiate at the Holy Sacraments. The Holy Spirit uses one hierarch today and tomorrow another, but the Church remains the same. Many priests are not worthy, but the Holy Spirit does not come and go in relation to our worthiness or unworthiness. The Holy Spirit is the life of the Church, even if some of the members of the Church are sick or wounded by sin” (p. 101-102). When the journalist challenged his assertion that bishops' virtuous lives are insignificant to the Church's continuity, he replied, “I never implied that.” He noted that countless holy bishops existed and convened ecumenical councils even during periods of widespread episcopal heresy. Nevertheless, the Church persisted, and the Holy Spirit remained active despite numerous crises.

Father Roman then cited the faithful who filled the churches even amidst severe persecution, emphasizing the significance of their ongoing spiritual nourishment through the Church's sacraments. This, in his view, preserved the church.

He says: “The faithful Orthodox people were wise in those days and did not leave the church. The churches under persecution were more crowded with believers than in the so-called free period, that is, when we began to enjoy freedom and democracy during the Constantinian era and our bishops no longer bargained with the authorities. When we were in prisons, we prayed for our hierarchs. We used to pray for the hierarchs, hoping they would do something to keep the churches open” (p. 103-104).

He cited Saint Gennadius II, Patriarch of Constantinople, who signed an agreement with the Ottoman Sultan after the fall of Constantinople to the Turks, stipulating that Christian services be limited to the remaining churches. He quoted the saintly patriarch, “It is time to sacrifice the forms in order to keep the essence.”

May God have mercy on us and infuse our souls with His grace, as He promised, “Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more.”