

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

Question: The media always talks about crises. Is there a Christian definition or concept of crisis?

Answer: The word “crisis” indicates simply that something is wrong and unnatural. Crises vary depending on the problems that cause them. The accumulation of problems is what constitutes a crisis. A crisis is more dangerous than a problem because it can make a person lose focus and become distracted, which can make it difficult to deal with problems effectively. From a Christian perspective, crises are a sign of the presence of sin in the world.

Q: According to Christianity, is man in crises predestined or free to choose?

A: This question deserves a more detailed answer. In short, Christians do not believe that man is predestined. God has given us freedom, and He will judge us on the Last Day. If we were predestined, why would God judge us? If He had already decided everything for us, there would be no need for judgment.

Q: Since we believe, according to Christianity, that crises are the product of our wrong choices, how can a person avoid these and know God’s will in his life?

A: In fact, this topic is considered one of the most difficult and delicate topics, and it needs spiritual discernment. There is a beautiful word in one of the Gospel texts, where Christ, before the Passion, asks the disciples to keep watch with Him (Matt. 26:38). He came back to them after His prayer and found them asleep. They could not watch with Him, yet he said to them: “Watch.” The Church Fathers interpret this word as “vigilance.” It is important for the Christian to train himself to be spiritually vigilant, that is, to be quickly sensitive to God’s will, His word and to any movement that happens to him. The Lord says: “The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak” (Matt. 26:41).

When a person is vigilant and his spiritual discernment is sharp, he can distinguish between things, and he can realize the evil in an event or the lesser evil in other, and so on. The spiritual fathers of our church, whom we consider the most vigilant in the Church, teach us that the virtue of discernment is the most important of virtues. To discern means to know the will of God, or what is pleasing to His will.

Q: In the Lord's Prayer, we pray: "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one." What is the importance of this petition to the Lord?

A: First, we need to understand its inner meaning. The literal meaning is not what is meant; that is, not to enter into any temptation. Such a thing cannot be realized on earth. Temptation also has a positive side: it strengthens, intensifies and increases a person's awareness. Many times, a person is lost and reckless, so temptation comes to him as a strong slap to wake up from his sleep and return to his senses.

The meaning of this petition is that the temptation should not be more than our ability to bear it, because the evil one is crafty. He fools us with many tricks, so we ask that the temptation not be harder than we can bear. In fact, most believers experience that God does not allow a temptation that exceeds our power.

Q: In the Epistle of James (1:2-3), we read: "Count it all joy, my brethren, when you meet various trials, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness." How can a Christian live through a crisis with joy?

A: I will give you an example that I have recently read about. It is a contemporary example; I will not give you one from ancient events or cultures. There was an Anglican priest from New Zealand named Michael Lapsley who lived in South Africa during the era of apartheid between blacks and whites. This monk, driven by his faith, resisted the brutal apartheid system – of course, with non-violent resistance because he was a Christian and a monk. His influence spread and expanded, so the authorities expelled him from South Africa, but he continued his struggle from exile. The regime did not leave him alone; it sent him a letter bomb that exploded on him, costing him his hands and one eye. Of course, a large number of shrapnel entered his body. He stayed in the hospital for seven consecutive months, and then he continued a long treatment for two years, to practice for managing his new life. He continued his struggle despite his new situation.

When the apartheid system ended, he returned to South Africa and established "The Institute for Healing of Memories" to bring together whites and blacks together, where they confessed their pains and mistakes towards each other. This was a way of healing through forgiveness and liberation from the horrible past. He continued his activity without stopping. He said about himself: "This test [the explosion] was like a real purification of myself." He also said: "I was resisting

apartheid and segregation between blacks and whites with great stubbornness and rigidity, but after the blast, I began to feel the extent of softness inside me, and the extent of my understanding of the victim and the executioner together, so that God would use me in establishing these centers.” This is what is meant by the Christian person transforming pain into joy and new ability.

Q: Can you give us examples from the Bible, examples of saints who have experienced crises and pain?

A: We have many examples. The clearest and most famous example that everyone knows is Job the Righteous. How greatly he suffered loss materially, physically, and emotionally. He lost all his children. And in the end, the question remained, why me? But he discovered a richness that he had not realized before. I remember one example about him. In one of the chapters, Job rebukes the Lord for the pain he is suffering, “But now they mock me, men younger than I, whose fathers I would have disdained to put with my sheep dogs” (30:1). This means that he was arrogant and aristocratic before his tribulation.

Paul the Apostle is another example. After he was converted to Christ, he suffered greatly in his life from dangers, toils, imprisonment, shipwreck, and hiding from his people for fear of being killed, and he considered it all as naught in order to gain Christ (2 Cor. 11:25-33). The Bible is full of these living examples that reflect the reality of human life.

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

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.

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

Question: There are instances of profoundly tragic psychological and physical suffering, murder, rape, wars, etc. If God desires salvation for everyone, why doesn't He intervene to prevent such pains that could lead to a loss of faith or a weakening of faith for some believers?

Answer: This question has persisted throughout human history, and no religion or philosophy has ignored it. Nevertheless, a definitive answer remains elusive, as previously mentioned; the response is experiential. We must navigate through these challenges to reach conclusions based on our encounters. I deeply appreciate Christ's response, which I believe is the most beautiful and fitting answer. Christ wasn't preoccupied with providing an intellectual explanation for the existence of evil, pain, illness, wars, and the like. While the Bible presents various explanations, Christ's focus transcended the satisfaction of intellectual curiosity. Rather, He saw a sick person and healed him; He saw a paralytic and straightened him; He saw the dead and raised them to life; He saw the hungry and fed them.

In my belief, a substantial part of the answer to this question, if not its entirety, lies in sharing in the suffering. Sharing with the sufferer—this is the role of the Church and believers, to participate, empathize, assist, support, console, and ensure that the afflicted do not feel alone.

Recently, I encountered a story from a French music composer who was blind for ten years and regained his sight. He authored a book discussing this experience, documenting his encounters with many others who, like him, had lost their sight. He recounts an interaction with a very elderly and extremely poor street vendor who said, "I've lived fifty years in this neighborhood, and no one has ever mentioned my name. I am not a person with a name, but a condition. I am referred to as 'the blind one.' When I was young, at your age, the need for affection consumed me. I used to go to brothels just to touch, because there, at least, someone would touch me. I didn't seek this for the sake of sexual pleasure but for someone to touch me, to feel me. Unfortunately, you can easily buy sexual pleasure with money, but emotional touch and connection cannot be purchased. So, I detested those women, because for them, it was just a job." This is a clear indication of how much humans need to feel a sense of engagement.

I believe that this is the most important and practical answer provided by Christ: to share with the sufferer. Naturally, the manner and quality of participation vary from person to person, from time to time, and from one situation to another. However, this is the message the Church should prioritize more than anything else.

Q: Unfortunately, we observe that some clergy lack the ability to empathize with those who are suffering. What is the reason for this, and how can we overcome it to provide better support?

A: Regrettably, the fault lies with us, as we were not instilled with a sense of sharing from childhood in our homes. Our society, unfortunately, nurtures us in selfishness, self-love, and consumerism. Consequently, even if we are believers and hold roles in the church, whether as bishops, priests, deacons, or monks, we may execute our service sincerely yet often lack the crucial sense of sharing. This sentiment is more vital than the service or gift we offer to those in need. Addressing this deficiency requires education. I earnestly hope that pastors will prioritize self-education and subsequently educate their congregations on the significance of sharing. Parents, too, must pay heightened attention to instilling the importance of sharing and giving into their children from an early age.

A noteworthy initiative in America illustrates the practical development of a sense of sharing among children. Some churches encourage children, especially during fasting periods, to collect items from their possessions to donate to children in poor countries or those afflicted by wars. This approach teaches children from a young age that their fasting is incomplete without giving from their personal savings for those in need.

Allow me to share an inspiring story about a priest named Henri Boulad, a Jesuit from Egypt. In one of his books, he recounts an incident involving his niece, who holds a deep affection for him. For her eighth birthday, he fulfilled her wish by gifting her a bicycle. She was overjoyed. But he surprised her by saying that his gift for her that year would be for her to give the bicycle to one of her friends in need, whose family couldn't afford to buy one. Initially reluctant, but due to her love for her uncle, she agreed to this unusual request. Later, she confided that the joy she experienced when she saw her friend's happiness with the bicycle far surpassed her own joy upon receiving it.

Q: Why does God create people who are very well-off financially and others who are in a state of misery; healthy individuals and sick individuals? Is it possible that God shows favoritism towards certain people over others?

A: This question is rooted in a false and misleading premise that assumes God is the one who designates some to be rich and others to be poor. Christian theology provides an alternative perspective, asserting that we live in a fallen world. This implies that the world has fallen from the Kingdom, as God initially created humanity in His image and endowed us with a portion of Himself. God granted us the potential to develop the divine image within us by reaching His example. However, growth towards the divine ideal is impossible without the grace of God and His companionship. The fall of humanity occurred when individuals chose to cultivate these divine abilities independently, apart from God, resulting in their fall from the Kingdom they once inhabited. Thus, we refer to our world as the fallen world, and Christ came to empower us to return to the purpose for which we were created. We are currently in the fallen world, not in the Kingdom. Creation is working toward perfection, but perfection is impossible without God.

When examining the existence of injustice, poverty, and other hardships, it is important to note that acknowledging this fallen reality doesn't mean that Christians accept it; rather, they are called to resist it. Regarding the idea of God favoring certain individuals over others, the Holy Bible is explicit in its teaching that God desires everyone to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth (1 Tim. 2:4). God's blessings are likened to rain falling on both the righteous and the wicked, and His sun shining on the good and the evil (Matt. 5:45).

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

The Christian Approach to Crises, Part Four *An Interview with Metropolitan Saba (Ispër)*

Question: Some may say we become atheists because we haven't seen the presence of God in the problems of our lives. How should we respond to this?

Answer: This is a reality, but I believe that if they had experienced love, they wouldn't have reached this stage. In one of his books, Dostoevsky said, "Complete atheism is on the penultimate stage of complete faith" (the novel *Demons*). If love had touched them, they would have felt the presence of God.

Humans often wait for a miraculous intervention, a supernatural act, from God. When they don't see it, they question, "Where is God?" Yet, it is certain that love changes people.

Consider this true story from the era of Khrushchev in the Soviet Union when churches were closed, faith was forbidden, the state was atheist and atheism was taught and enforced. Many Communist Party members, the elite, returned to churches in their retirement. Authorities investigated this phenomenon, and a story published in Pravda (the Communist Party's official newspaper) shed light on one man's experience. The man, a former director of a large factory with 4,000 workers, was honored with a party at his retirement, where he was presented with a valuable gift for his years of service. However, he found himself alone after a divorce, with his two sons working far away. Feeling isolated, he revisited the factory where he was initially warmly welcomed. The new director invited him to his office for coffee with the department heads, and this made the man happy. But over time, the reception dwindled. Later, his routine became solitary, sitting in the city square, drinking coffee, and reading the newspaper alone.

One day, a stranger approached, asking to share coffee with him, inquiring about the sadness that he could see in his eyes. The man shared his story that led to his loneliness, and the stranger suggested, "Come to church, and you will not be alone." Initially dismissive, the man's curiosity led him to the church one Sunday, arriving towards the end of the Liturgy. The welcoming friend noticed him, introduced him to others, and invitations to homes, cafés, and church activities followed. His gloomy life transformed, and in the interview, he stated, "I returned to life because I didn't stay alone, and I only found the church by my side."

Q: You assert that if God is with us, then everything is fine. Atheists challenge this by asking for evidence of His existence. How can it be proven?

A: It's important to acknowledge that there is no definitive intellectual or philosophical proof on this matter. Attempting to provide logical evidence can be likened to proving the subjective experience of love. Imagine asking someone deeply in love to logically prove the beauty of his or her partner. It's a matter of feeling, something that defies straightforward intellectual arguments. They will tell you if you look at them through their eyes, you will see that this is the most beautiful person.

Experiential matters, including matters of faith, lack mathematical proofs, where you can say one plus one equals two. For instance, one's appreciation for classical music can't be intellectually forced upon someone who doesn't share the same experience or cultural background. What might be considered a fine art by one person could be perceived as noise by others. It may provoke them to the point of agitation, so how can you convince them that it is a fine art?

I am fully convinced that all believers have many experiences in which they touch God in a real way. The more sincere our experiences are, the more they affect others. People do not need a lot of intellectual sophistication. It can help, but it does not always lead to salvation. Thought helps us to acquire the appropriate language for speaking and dialoging with others, so that our language does not seem strange. But what leads a person to communion with God is living experience.

Q: How can we maintain our faith and resist doubting the existence of God when we witness the prosperity of the wicked, while "the children of our Lord" endure persecution and suffering?

A: As true and mature Christians, our perspective shifts. Instead of questioning God in times of adversity, we express gratitude, saying, "Thank you, Lord, because I am not rich, for in poverty there is much wealth." The Apostle Paul says, "We are poor and enrich many" (2 Cor. 6:10). Consider the gospel parable of selling all possessions to acquire the pearl of great price (Matt. 13:45-46), symbolizing the Kingdom of Heaven. When God is with us, our reliance on worldly possessions diminishes, for they are added unto us: "Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and the rest will be added to you" (Matthew 6:33). Communion with the Lord alters our entire logic.

Reflecting on the Apostle Paul's personal experience, as conveyed in his second letter to the Corinthians (6:8-10), provides insight: "We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold we live; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything."

Q: May we have a final word from you, Your Eminence?

A: Pain is prevalent today, pervasive and intense. The nature and intensity of this pain may differ across regions, but the universal desire for someone to care remains. Instead of dwelling on the absence of someone to care for us, let's shift our focus to caring for others. If each of us initiated a genuine concern for others, rather than lamenting our own perceived lack of care, we would discover the fulfillment we seek. The joy derived from giving surpasses that of receiving. It is our calling to rekindle the essence of true Christian communion, wherein the spirit of caring and compassion forms the foundation of our interactions.

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