

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.