

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.

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