

A Bishop's Scribbles
By Metropolitan Saba (Isper)

This title may surprise many. This article was written to convey the suffering of the bishop who seeks the face of God and the sanctification of his people. It aims to shed light on the suffering of the Church in the East—a Church that, together with her people, lives under harsh conditions, leading the faithful to look upon the Church as a lifeline of salvation. Yet, amid this suffering, they have come to demand from the Church more than she can bear. The article is, in essence, an indirect call for us to intensify our prayers for our Church.

Most believers are used to relating to their pastor in only one direction — he gives and they receive. They expect his hand to remain always extended toward them, carrying whatever they think they need or desire. To them, he exists to fulfill their requests. They often treat him like a “superhuman” or someone who must not make mistakes, get tired, or need rest! Why, they think, should he even have to worry about food or drink? They forget that he is a human being, and that he too needs to feel a living spiritual and emotional connection with his flock and with others. In fact, such connection is not a luxury, it is essential for him to continue his ministry and fruitful service.

For a pastor to endure being forgotten by his people, he would have to be an angel in a body without human limits. But if he is a man with a sensitive conscience and a tender heart, living his priestly calling in sincerity and truth, then he can only accept carrying his cross daily, fixing his eyes on the Lord and seeking from Him alone true comfort and consolation.

The needs of God's people are many and varied — spiritual, social, material, psychological. That is why the role of faithful believers, who are conscious of their responsibility, is indispensable. How can a pastor meet all these needs when so many expect only to be embraced, but few ever embrace him?

I sometimes wonder: what image do believers really have of their pastor? Many are astonished to discover that he is, in fact, human — that he needs human connection, if not also spiritual companionship. In their minds, they place him on a very high pedestal — yet they leave him there alone, excusing themselves from striving for that same holiness to which he and they are equally called.

At the same time, they show him little mercy for any action, behavior, or even word that displeases them. Their measure is not whether his ministry aligns with the Gospel. What matters to them is that he didn't fulfill their request, even if he tried his best and went beyond his strength.

Saint Tikhon of Zadonsk described this painful reality from his own experience:

“If a priest guards himself from sin, they call him rigid;
if he grieves over his sin, they call him gloomy;
if he gives alms, they call him a hypocrite;
if he prays much, they call him an extremist;
if he is insulted and forgives, they call him weak;
if he gives generously to the poor, they call him a fool.”

A Romanian metropolitan, whose diocese numbers just over a million people, once confided to me that his greatest suffering lies in how to shepherd his flock according to the demands of the Gospel, when many of them do not want that Gospel, and sometimes even ask him to do what contradicts it.

His words reminded me of the great Saint Isaac the Syrian, who in the seventh century was appointed bishop of Nineveh. Two men once came before him, quarreling over a field. He told them, “The Gospel says so-and-so.” One of them replied, “What do I have to do with the Gospel? I just want my rights.” At that, the bishop said, “Then what am I doing here? I have no work except the Gospel.” He left the episcopate for the desert, where he became one of the greatest spiritual saints.

Another deep pain for a bishop comes when his flock shows no interest in renewing their lives, purifying their hearts, or growing spiritually, and they are content to remain as they are. For what is the bishop's role, if not to sanctify the lives of his people and help them walk that path? His primary service is to nurture everything that leads them to progress in living their Christian faith.

Saint Tikhon of Zadonsk served his spiritually and materially poor diocese with selfless devotion. He tried with all the wisdom and strength God gave him to lift up his people spiritually. Yet he wrote in his notes about the preacher he had invited to teach them: “In vain does the poor preacher wear out his voice.” His illness – the reason he gave the Russian Holy Synod when asking to be relieved of his episcopal duties — was no doubt the result of deep suffering among a people unprepared to

live the ways of the Gospel and unwilling to learn. He spent the rest of his life in a monastery, devoted to prayer, contemplation, and charity.

People generally treat a bishop more as a social or political figure than as a spiritual father watching over their salvation. They want him to provide for their material needs, not their spiritual ones. In our Eastern lands, where religion and society intertwine, they often expect him to approve whatever they desire, even if it contradicts the Gospel. If he refuses, he's labeled "strict" or "fanatical."

This places him in constant inner struggle: How far can his conscience go in accommodating people? Can he look the other way when they insist on imposing their will in matters of faith, twisting or wounding its essence? Has he fulfilled his duty if he guides them according to God's will and they still refuse to follow?

Some expect him to be a businessman, building projects, launching initiatives, managing investments. Others expect him to be a politician, and by "politics," they mean securing their own interests and influence. Some want him at their social events, presiding at grand banquets, engaging in all conversations except those that concern his true spiritual mission. Then they call him "charming" or "well-mannered."

But if he is truly a man of God — pure, prayerful, devoted to visiting his people, strictly faithful to the Gospel commandments — they say, "He belongs in a monastery, not a diocese," even if he gives his very body to the poor.

Our Christian people in the East have yet to move beyond the Ottoman-era idea of the "strong bishop" — the powerful community chief who, for four hundred years, acted as both governor and representative of his people before the civil authorities.

What most deeply isolates a pastor, however, is when he finds no response within his own diocese, when his flock shows indifference to his preaching, when they abandon their responsibilities toward the Church yet still expect him to produce wonders and achievements. For some to consider the diocese and its resources as the bishop's personal property shows a complete withdrawal from their faith commitment. But to expect every service and every solution to come from the bishop or priest alone is ignorant at best and tragic at worst.

Many are quick to criticize their pastors "for every little thing," whether fair or not, whether it concerns something that displeases them or simply doesn't benefit them

personally, while at the same time excusing themselves from any responsibility. They seem to think their only duty is to complain and attack. Worse still, they scrutinize every aspect of the bishop's personal life, his home, his spending, his daily habits. They watch him and judge him on how he lives, while only a few truly care for him, support him, and connect with him at a deeper level. Those who genuinely want him to be a man of God are fewer still.

And yet, they wonder why he sometimes feels alone in their midst.