

On Spiritual Fatherhood *By Metropolitan Saba (Isper)*

The Orthodox tradition does not recognize the phrase “spiritual father.” This is a modern term that appeared in Western languages, possibly influenced by Catholic spirituality. The Orthodox tradition uses the term “elder,” which corresponds to *geronda* in Greek and *starets* in Russian.

This term embodies the Orthodox understanding of what is now commonly called a “spiritual father.” One who has grown old in his life with God and has come to know it through personal, living experience is called an elder (*geronda*). This means that he has spent time as a disciple in the spiritual life and has advanced in it to the point of becoming a great expert, capable—through the testimony of recognized and holy fathers—and guiding others in it.

Likewise, the Orthodox tradition does not recognize an academic method that one follows to obtain the role of a spiritual father. The only path is discipleship under an experienced elder for growth in what we call “the life in Christ.” The gift of serving as an elder comes from God, not from studying theology academically or only holding the priestly office.

For this reason, liturgical tradition includes the service of “appointing a priest as a spiritual father.” In this service, the bishop grants a priest the blessing to administer the sacrament of confession. A newly ordained priest performs all priestly functions except hearing confessions until receiving this blessing.

This tradition arises from the Church’s long experience, which affirms that not every priest is fit to minister this sacrament of healing. Some priests may never receive permission to hear confessions due to lack of experience or sufficient maturity. Others may be prohibited from continuing in this ministry if they commit serious errors that are destructive to those who come to confess.

To understand the difference between a confessor and an elder, we must return to the Orthodox concept of an elder. In his book *The Inner Kingdom*, Metropolitan Kallistos Ware explains the Orthodox rule is that an elder is discovered—he is revealed by the Holy Spirit, not appointed nor self-appointed. The faithful recognize his gift and spiritual authority through their experience of him, accepting his advice and witnessing its good fruit. They begin to flock to him, opening their hearts to

him. Many times, the elder refuses those who seek his counsel and sends them to others. But under their persistence and out of love, he accepts them and thus discovers his role as a spiritual father (see p. 155).

A confessor, on the other hand, holds a significant position in the Church as institution. He is a canonically ordained priest whom his bishop deems qualified to hear confessions, offering guidance from the Holy Gospel and the teachings of the Church Fathers to help believers walk their Christian path in a way that pleases the Lord.

If the elder is a priest, he may fulfill both roles, serving as a confessor while providing spiritual fatherhood. The faithful, as guardians of true faith, discern who possesses the gift of spiritual fatherhood based on the fruits of his guidance over time.

An elder does not only offer guidance and encouragement with words but also strengthens and comforts the faithful through his living example—and sometimes through his silence. In Orthodox monastic life, there is a well-known saying: “It is enough for me to look at your face, Father.” An elder carries his spiritual children in prayer, interceding for them before God. Many a time, the spiritual children will leave confession without an immediate solution, and later, the answer to their struggles comes from God by the intercessions of the elder’s prayers that provide healing and guidance. The elder does not offer advice from his own intelligence, reasoning, or study, but speaks through the Holy Spirit, which dwells in him. Therefore, an elder’s response may sometimes shock those who seek his guidance, as it may be completely different from what they expect.

St. Basil the Great describes the spiritual father as “the physician of souls who heals with great tenderness according to the teachings of Christ.” He also calls him the “healer of the passions” (Letter 45:5-6). A true elder is a spiritual doctor who heals the soul from its diseases and struggles, liberating the person from the bondage of sinful passions. He focuses on the inner transformation of a person rather than external behaviors. The elder, through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, creates a new person in Christ, not the other way around.

One of the greatest qualities of an elder is the gift of discernment. Spiritual guidance requires deep understanding of the human soul, its struggles, and the ways in which the devil tempts people. A confessor who lacks this discernment may

offer wrong spiritual advice which can harm rather than heal. Metropolitan Athanasios of Limassol, a disciple of St. Paisios the Athonite, states: “Bad spiritual advice is like giving the wrong medicine to a sick person.” He warns that if an elder lacks discernment, he can misguide his spiritual children away from salvation. In one of his talks to nuns, he advised: “You must learn how God works in the hearts of people so that you do not give advice that could harm them” (*Gifts of the Desert*, Chapter 8).

A true elder is not appointed by certificates or titles but is recognized by his fruits. St. John Climacus advises great caution when choosing a spiritual guide:

“When we, out of humility and a desire for salvation, decide to submit and entrust ourselves to another person in the Lord, let us first examine and scrutinize, and even test our guide, so to speak, especially if we are somewhat malicious or arrogant, so that we do not encounter a sailor instead of a pilot, a sick person instead of a physician, a person enslaved to passions instead of a person freed from them, a sea instead of a port, and thus we encounter the imminent drowning of our souls” (*The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, Step 4:6).

Similarly, St. Paisios the Athonite offers this guidance in his letters:

“Strive as much as you can for your spiritual father to be a spiritual person, adorned with virtues in practice, rather than just a teacher. He must be a true captain of souls, not just someone who applies rules to others that he learned through study without having lived them himself. He should be by nature of great love, seasoned with the salt of discernment, so that he shares the sufferings of his children and does not send them directly to paradise in the manner of Diocletian, that is, to die as martyrs. The spiritual father should be very strict only with himself and have great love for others, a love that is not false, but with much discernment, because, if he loses this discernment he will harm his children with his love, similar to the love of Eli the priest (1 Kings 1:2), and thus the wrath of God will descend upon him and his children.”