

The Sanctifying Dimension, Part Two

By His Eminence Metropolitan Saba (Isper)

Some have attributed the decline of the sanctifying dimension in the lives of believers to the neglect of the clergy. Yet to place responsibility on priests alone while ignoring the responsibility of the faithful is not accurate. Not all clergy are saints, nor are all believers. There are many good priests, but they are often discouraged by the pressure placed upon them to be everything except sanctifiers. Thus, while the responsibility of the clergy is indeed great, there is also a great responsibility resting upon the faithful. In the [previous article](#), I referred to the role of all of us, and to the importance of the home in spiritual formation.

For this reason, I would like to expand a little further on this topic and speak about prayer, its role, and some of the current obstacles, especially those caused by believers themselves. I hope to shed light on our shared responsibility, clergy and laity alike, for this absence of prayer, so that together we may rise to a more active life of sanctification.

Let us begin by speaking of the richness of the Orthodox rite, in particular the Byzantine rite. This rite is distinguished by its liturgical richness and by the way it liturgically embraces the full range of human life. The Church accompanies the believer with her prayers from conception to birth, to the child's first entrance into the church, then through Baptism, Holy Communion, and spiritual growth. She blesses life through the divine sacraments, blesses the home through the sanctification of water, and likewise blesses fields and possessions. She accompanies the faithful in sickness, travel, study, engagement, marriage, and even to the moment of departure from this life. Nor does she cease afterward, for she continues to pray for the repose of the soul.

The concern of the Church is to embrace and spiritually nourish the human person, so that he may become a citizen of the heavenly Kingdom, receive the saving and salvific gifts of God, and have the abundant life (John 10:10) which Christ came to give.

For this reason, the Orthodox rite has been enriched with salvific events and with events of daily life that the Church has baptized and clothed with a Christian character, so that they may become spiritual windows contributing to the salvation of the faithful. Thus, the feasts of our Lord, of the Mother of God, and of the saints

are distributed throughout the year. There is scarcely a day without one feast or more. Each feast has its own liturgical texts, scriptural readings, and beautiful devotional hymns, though they differ in length, importance, beauty, and popularity.

In addition, this rite has been enriched with many prayers that bless the believer in every aspect of life. There is a prayer for everything. We may mention, for example, the prayers of blessing that encompass one's circumstances, intentions, work, and possessions. There are also blessings for occasions recognized worldwide that may be given a Christian dimension, such as the Day of the Environment, Teacher's Day, Mother's Day, Father's Day, and so forth.

Nor should we forget the daily prayers distributed throughout the yearly liturgical cycle: the compunctionate services of Great Lent, Holy and Great Week, the canons of supplication to the saints, and the prayers of entreaty.

Metropolitan Kallistos (Ware), in his book *The Orthodox Church*, writes: "The richness of Orthodox services requires the believer to possess a small library of some twenty important volumes. Though difficult to use at first, these volumes are among the greatest treasures of the Orthodox Church."

In the face of all this richness—which fills dozens of volumes—one cannot but be surprised by the lack of liturgical practice currently found in parish churches, and that the overwhelming majority of believers do not know what exists within their own Church. If we set aside the well-known services of Great Lent and Holy Week, we find that most believers do not know anything of the Church's abundant richness and beauty other than the Divine Liturgy.

Let us consider a few examples.

To my knowledge, most churches in cities and smaller parishes have one or two chanters celebrate Orthros every Sunday morning. How many faithful actually participate in it? Compare the numbers attending Orthros with those attending the Divine Liturgy.

As for Great Vespers on Saturday evening, which carries all the meanings of the Resurrection we commemorate every Sunday, how many pray it together with the priest in the churches where it is served every week? Once, I attended Saturday evening services in Kyiv and another in Moscow. The Slavs celebrated both Vespers

and Orthros on Saturday evening, entirely chanted. I was astonished to see the churches full of faithful standing as there were no pews in their churches. Those who did not participate in these services would not approach Holy Communion on Sunday morning, even if they had made their confession that night.

Let us take another example: the daily prayers. How many offer them? Among those who practice confession and seek spiritual guidance, how many raise the obstacles they encounter in their prayer life? From my experience as a confessor, especially when I was serving as a parish priest, I rarely heard complaints about prayer other than distraction of mind. The greater struggle for the overwhelming majority of penitents was perseverance in offering prayer morning and evening, no matter how small or brief the personal rule given to them by their spiritual father.

Observers note greater participation in services that are followed by some social gathering, especially food. For example, attendance at the Presanctified Liturgy celebrated on Wednesday evening is much higher in parishes that offer an agape meal afterward. Is this response rooted in a love for prayer, or does gathering around the table play the stronger role in motivating participation? The answer is up to each person, for our role is not to condemn or judge, but to observe and to awaken.

What would an outside observer understand when invited to witness the celebration of baptism or marriage? Are not social appearances often dominant over the spiritual dimension, sometimes to the point of obscuring it entirely? Are not the music, clothing, flowers, decorations, festivities, and invitations considered the most important things—the ones given time, attention, and even money? What does this mean except that, in our deepest part of our conscience, we often assign little weight to the spiritual reality the Church provides for us, while giving priority to social appearances?

The presence of a bottle of holy water and another of blessed oil on the icon shelf in the home remains common among Orthodox Christians. Anointing the sick with blessed oil is still a natural practice among the faithful, sought for blessing and healing.

Our grandparents were accustomed to setting aside a place for God in their homes: the icon corner and the lamp kept burning before it. This is an authentic and foundational Eastern Christian tradition. Where is it today? How many homes still

light the lamp on Saturday evenings or in times of trial and distress? Where has the censuring of icons gone? Or the use of incense in family prayer? Do not such traditions cultivate a tangible sense of God's presence—or more than that, a spiritual presence permeated by the divine presence—which becomes planted in the hearts of children and is never erased from their memory?

What do we conclude from these examples? Where is the spiritual practice of the people? Why do so many fail to respond to spiritual activities? If we are honest, should we not say that many do not grant them the same importance they give to social demands? Does the responsibility here rest on the clergy alone? Where is the role of true Christian formation? Where are our spiritual homes that live in piety, fear of God, fidelity to the Gospel commandments, and prayer—and that hand these things on? Where is our role as fathers and mothers, grandfathers and grandmothers, priests and faithful?