

The Laborers are Few!

By His Eminence Metropolitan Saba (Isper)

The Lord says in the Gospel: “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Pray therefore to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers for his harvest” (Matt. 9:37–38). These words come after the Gospel describes Jesus going throughout all the cities and villages, teaching, proclaiming the Gospel of the Kingdom, and healing the sick. “And when he saw the multitudes, his heart was filled with compassion for them, because they were poor and scattered among themselves, like sheep without a shepherd” (Matt. 9:36).

Did He mean that the laborers needed for His harvest would always remain few? Or that the faithful among them would be few?

The Gospel gives no answer to this question. It simply continues by recounting the calling of the twelve disciples and, in the tenth chapter of Matthew, presenting the Lord Jesus’ instructions to them—instructions that are far from easy, for they demand a great deal of asceticism and self-denial.

Many who began their priestly ministry with enthusiasm and sincerity were unable to sustain that same fervor. “The cares of life,” the abundance of hardships, and the scarcity of human consolation around them caused their zeal to grow cold. They consequently entered the cycle of routine and the mere performance of services—nothing more.

A priest is an apostle; otherwise, he becomes an employee who attends to religious affairs. An apostle bears a message: he has a purpose, a consuming concern, and a determination to convey his message in the best ways possible. The priest-apostle is consumed by the word of God and the salvation of souls. He can find no rest and never ceases laboring for their sake. His love for his flock springs from his love for his Lord: “Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me more than these? ... Yes, Lord; You know that I love You.” He said to him, “Tend My sheep” (John 21:16).

Where does a priest’s apostolic spirit come from? How does he keep it burning within him? How does he confront its hardships and temptations without allowing the coldness of his flock—or of the ecclesiastical institution in its human aspect—to seep into him? What does he need most, given that he is, in

the end, a human being who bears his own sins and weaknesses, even as he aspires to overcome them through his faithful love for his Lord and his devotion to Him? How can the flock help him remain faithful? And what is required of the ecclesiastical institution in this regard?

There is yet another pressing question: Why are “the laborers” few? Where do they come from? How do they know that God is calling them to dedicate themselves to His service in His living Body, the Church?

These are but a few of the questions that must be placed before both the personal and the ecclesial conscience. If we desire a Church that is “glorious, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing” (Eph. 5:27), then we must ask the question—and search for the answer!

In the past, families took pride in offering their finest sons to the Lord. In the Old Testament, the firstborn was set apart and consecrated to the Lord. In the New Testament, however, all believing men and women have become consecrated to the Lord. Consequently, all are responsible for carrying forward the Church’s spiritual ministry—each, of course, according to his or her gift and calling. “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own special people, that you may declare His wonderful deeds” (1 Pet. 2:9).

The history of the Church shows that priestly vocations increase in direct proportion to the abundance of devout families and to the practice of daily prayer and fasting in the home, together with participation in the Church’s liturgical worship alongside the rest of the faithful.

Therefore, when the number of priests declines and the need for them becomes urgent, our families will face a question on the Last Day—and it may be a difficult one: “What about you? Where was your part? What did you do with your children? How did you raise them? Did you nurture them in the love of God and His Church, and in the desire for Him and His Kingdom? Or were you content to educate them only in academics, sports, music, languages, and everything else you thought would benefit them in this world—and this world alone?”

It is indeed true that the priesthood is a calling. The Lord said to His disciples: “You did not choose Me, but I chose you and appointed you, that you should go

and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain, so that whatever you ask the Father in My name He may give you” (John 15:16). Yet another question arises here: How does the Lord call new apostles to Himself today? How does He call me? How do I know that He wants me to be His priest? How does He call my son? What are the signs that point to such a calling? And so forth.

For this reason, the Archdiocese, in cooperation with Ancient Faith Ministries, organized a spiritual retreat titled “[Do You Want to Be a Priest?](#)” It invited those young men of the Archdiocese who sense a desire for the priesthood but need to discern and deepen their calling.

I say to the young men: Remember the Lord’s words, “The laborers are few,” and do not wait for a stronger calling than this. What more do you need than His request: “Pray the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest”? Perhaps He has called you many times, my son, but you have not heard His voice. Listen to Him in the stillness of your prayer. Place yourself in His hands and ask Him to do with you as He wills. What other calling are you awaiting, in the face of the Church’s need and the growing number of converts, before casting yourself into this adventure of love—until He raises you into His Kingdom?

Take care, however, not to enter this ministry unless you are filled with love for God and His people.

May God have mercy on my father, who resisted my decision until the very last moment. Yet once he became convinced of my determination, he said in the commanding tone of a master: “Finish your university studies first, my son. The priesthood is a ministry that will either raise you to heaven or cast you down into hell. I want your path to be secure. If you discover that you are unable to continue along this path, or that you have made the wrong choice, your university degree will keep you from being forced to continue in it against your will and, consequently, from doing harm to it. I do not want my son to make a profession of priestly ministry.”

He wanted me to be an apostle, not a functionary performing religious services. His words greatly troubled me at the time, but I later came to understand their truth and importance during my theological studies. I thanked God—and my father—for them many times, and I still do.