

## **The Cross in Our Life, Part One**

*By His Eminence Metropolitan Saba (Isper)*

### **The Cross of the World and Its Gifts**

Blessed Augustine says: “I know three categories: One saves through the cross, another is saved through the cross, and the third is condemned by the cross.” Christ alone belongs to the first category. The rest of us belong to one of the other two.

The cross stands before every human being. There is no one who does not have one cross or more. As long as death is present, crosses will remain part of our personal lives. Because this present world is passing away, and because our own existence is passing away with it, we experience pain, anguish, and sorrow. This is because we bind our feelings—which form part of our very being—to the image of this transitory world.

We therefore face one of two choices: either to flee from the cross and avoid it, or to confront it with courage, faith, and acceptance. Fleeing only increases the cross’s weight; it does nothing more than change its name. In reality, it means exchanging one cross for another—one that may appear lighter to the person fleeing, but that is, in truth, heavier than the cross from which he fled. Confronting the cross, on the other hand, means accepting it willingly at the beginning of the journey—even if not yet joyfully—and seeking to discover its meaning and its role in forming and shaping the person who bears it.

Before Christ, the cross was an instrument of death; through Christ, it became a source of life. Pain and suffering once led to despair, and despair is spiritual death. In Christ, however, they have become a path toward liberation and the discovery of true life—a life that transcends the familiar conditions of this temporal existence. Every Sunday morning we proclaim: “Through the Cross, joy has come into all the world.” Did not the Cross precede the Resurrection and the life that burst forth from the tomb?

Our contemporary way of life may hinder our encounter with true life. A person often stands before the beautiful gifts of this world, becomes immersed in them, and confines himself to the desire to possess them, without noticing what lies beyond them—or even the One who gave them. Their brilliance entices him to acquire more and more, until, with time, he becomes their captive. His life thus

passes within a narrow framework devoted solely to satisfying the desires of this earthly life.

This beautiful world in which we live is a gift from God—or, at least, this is how we ought to regard it. Just as we care for a gift, receive it with joy and delight, strive to preserve it, and feel gratitude toward the one who gave it to us, so too must we care for this world, preserve it, and remain constantly grateful to God for it.

In reality, our “beautiful planet has been transformed into a slaughterhouse,” as Saint Justin Popović expressed it, because of humanity’s greed and selfish appetite for exploiting its resources in a deadly pursuit of profit and consumption.

When we receive a gift from someone, we ought first to look toward the person who gave it, rather than allowing our eyes to remain fixed on the gift itself. Consumer society has weakened the spirit of gratitude in modern man while cultivating his desire to possess. His gaze has thus become fixed solely upon the product. Little by little, and without noticing it—often even unintentionally—he becomes enslaved to the gift.

Health is a gift. The beauty of nature is a gift. Clean air is a gift. Family is a gift. Work and productivity are gifts. Income is a gift. Wholesome recreation is a gift. Friends are gifts—and the list goes on. How numerous are God’s gifts to us! But are we aware of them? Do we receive them with joy and thanksgiving, drawing ever closer to their Giver? Do they lead us to Him?

Naturally, a healthy person loves the giver personally for who he is and not merely because of his gift. Likewise, a Christian loves God for who He is, not merely for His gifts. The wise person does not stop at the gift as though it were the ultimate reality. He knows that it will eventually pass away and that the joy it gives is temporary, having its season before its radiance fades. He therefore turns toward the Giver—the everlasting and ever-present source of every gift—namely, God.

In truth, every gift entails a certain cross. This cross reveals to us that none of these gifts constitutes the final and ultimate reality. Herein lies the true cross of the gifts of our world: the cross that arises from the alternation between receiving a gift and losing it. Not all our dreams are fulfilled, nor are they fulfilled whenever we desire. Thus, our lives move between success and failure, eagerness and weariness, joy and sorrow. What we desire may be fulfilled entirely or only partially; conversely, we

may lose it in part or altogether. This cross is especially painful for those who have not learned gratitude, who have not yet understood the meaning of true life, and who continue to confine it within the limits of this earthly existence.

The absence or loss of a gift leads us to ask why. Its loss also makes us more aware of its place and role in our lives. The more important and essential the lost gift is, the greater and higher the possibility of spiritual growth for the person who has lost it.

In my youth, I was deeply moved by a virtuous woman who fell asleep in the Lord many years ago. She spent a year and a half in the hospital and underwent several successive operations. Her husband divorced her while she was hospitalized, and she had no children. She suffered greatly and her heavy cross moved her to question the meaning of all that had happened to her. With the help of her spiritual father and faithful friends, she discovered that she was being called to a noble mission. She dedicated her life to nursing education at a time when no nursing schools existed, and also to teaching a pure spiritual theology, which was rare in those days.

The Christian bears this cross of the world—and the cross of his own existence—not only with acceptance but also with a certain joy, because he knows that beyond this cross there is a life that does not perish. Through this faith, the Christian sees the world as crucified and dead to him. He also sees himself, together with all his inclinations, as crucified and dead to this present world. The believer works to improve this present world, even as it moves toward decay and death. He cultivates within it the seeds of the coming resurrection by striving toward his own personal resurrection and toward the resurrection of this world, which is the gift.

Throughout this journey of life, a person may discover, through tragedy and suffering, the meaning behind losing certain things that had seemed essential to him. Many times, however, he may also discover grace within their loss. He then gives thanks to God, because he would never have noticed the things that are truly more essential had he continued to enjoy those things that were taken from him.

Such was the experience of some who spent years in solitary confinement because of their faith. Amid the tragedy of what they endured, they experienced and tasted a divine grace that filled them with a profound peace — a peace they found themselves missing after they were released from prison. Their crosses refined their characters and made them more illumined, preparing them to fulfill an essential role later in life.

Read some of biographies of the Orthodox Romanian prisoners during the communist era. In this sense, the Romanian priest and theologian, Saint Dumitru Stăniloae, who was himself imprisoned because of his Christian faith, says that the world, together with our existence within it, is the cross that we must bear until the end of our earthly lives. We experience the transitory nature of this world as an unceasing cross. Yet through our Christian faith and the grace of God, we can live this cross in the hope of the Resurrection. For this reason, we bear it with joy.