

The Cross in Our Life, Part Two

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The Cross of Relationships

Atheistic existentialism says, “Hell is other people,” whereas Christian existentialism says, “Paradise is other people.” Saint Silouan the Athonite used to say, “Our brother is our life.” In Christ, the other — who, according to the Gospel, is our “neighbor” — is no longer an outsider. Every stranger becomes your neighbor when you treat him as the Good Samaritan treated the wounded man (Luke 10). Thus, if you strive to approach every human being with love and compassion, you will see that all are your neighbors. Yet it is important to understand that whenever you feel responsible for others, whether individually or collectively, you continually bear the cross of that responsibility.

There is a heavy cross here, specifically in our relationships with others, beginning with the members of our own family and extending even to our enemies. This cross arises from our desire to protect those we love, to help them, and to stand beside them in their trials and distresses, even when they may not want our help, may be unwilling to follow our advice, or may misunderstand us. At times, they may even oppose us in proportion to our love for them, because they demand an expression of our love that differs from ours, and that may contradict our principles and morals.

In this world, we cannot but bear responsibility for whatever may threaten the lives of those entrusted to our care and love; first, those closest to us, and then everyone with whom we come into contact in one way or another.

In sharing their burden, our own cross grows heavier, just as theirs grows heavier. Sharing responsibility for their lives becomes a source of great anxiety and pressure. Can you simply cease caring about your children, your spouse, your parents, or your siblings? You may see them walking along a path that leads to destruction—materially or spiritually, emotionally or relationally—and your love instinctively compels you to stand beside them, strengthen and support them, and share in their pain and suffering.

Your sorrow may be magnified by being so close to them, especially since they might reject your offerings or misinterpret your actions for selfish reasons, although you had different intentions. You grieve for them and bear their burdens to the extent that you know the terrible end they will reach.

It is in this sense that Saint Silouan the Athonite said, “The greater the love, the greater the suffering.” You cannot simply turn your eyes away from someone you love. At times, you may try to put him out of your mind, but the moment you hear that something bad has happened to him, your suppressed love erupts in anguish. This is a cross that leads you toward openness and selflessness, raising you to become like your Lord in His tender compassion. As the sufferings of your love increase, your heart becomes more tender, more open, and more elevated.

There is a second meaning to the cross of relationships, which we encounter in the many people who behave with open hostility toward us, even when we have done them no wrong. This is a cross we may be required to carry until death. Why do some people feel hostility toward someone who has neither harmed nor offended them? In reality, human beings are pulled by many different impulses of which they are often unaware. They allow these impulses to drive them and consequently deal with others solely according to their feelings—yet feelings are deceptive and changeable. A person’s psychological state often plays a decisive role in shaping his relationships with others.

Some people may oppose you because your uprightness exposes their crookedness, even if you have never behaved offensively toward them. Your very presence disturbs them and says to them, “You are wrong.” They do not want to listen to their conscience, of which you remind them even when you remain silent and keep your distance. Your steadfastness in your convictions brings their evil schemes into the light and exposes their wrongful intentions.

How heavy, too, is the cross of those who do not understand you, who misunderstand you, or who judge you according to assumptions and interpretations that have never even crossed your mind. This cross becomes even heavier when your intentions are the exact opposite of what they read into

your conduct. Moreover, they refuse to accept any explanation or clarification from you. You seek their material and physical well-being and strive to help them grow spiritually and humanly, yet they perceive the very opposite.

In such a situation, bear their failure to understand your good intentions as a cross — one that urges you to examine yourself carefully, so that you may discover any weakness, error, or impropriety in your conduct. Leave room within yourself for the possibility that you bear some responsibility for their failure to understand you, even when you are certain that they have treated you unjustly. Your tone of voice, the look in your eyes, the movement of your hands — all or some of these may have provoked them in a way you neither intended nor desired. Once, during a conversation, an atheist struck Saint Tikhon of Zadonsk across the face. The saint bowed down before him and apologized for having provoked him!

In addition, always carry such people in your prayers. Do not allow your memory to dwell continually on the details of what happened, and do not speak about them excessively. Ask the Lord to have mercy on them. Remember them by name in your daily prayers. You will discover that, despite their hostility, they remain close to you and dwell within your heart — at least as far as you are concerned.

Every effort we make to spread goodness, uprightness, and a culture of love and forgiveness is accompanied by a cross that we must bear. If we avoid this cross, however, we are in fact renouncing the struggle and spiritual labor required to do what is good and to serve love. Consequently, we lose its blessing and the grace that God pours out upon us through it.

To avoid the cross is to refuse to carry it, thereby depriving yourself of the discovery of the depth and greatness of the powers and capacities hidden within you. You forget that you were created in the image of God, and that the traces of the divine image lie dormant within you, awaiting your cooperation so that they may be brought forth. God allows the cross to become the instrument by which they are revealed.

Every transformation of the self entails a certain inner rupture, which we experience as a cross. Every advancement requires abandoning that to which we are accustomed or comfortable. The cross is necessary because it refines you, so that you may become a clear mirror reflecting your true, new humanity — the human person fashioned according to the likeness of his Creator.

Saint John Climacus says, in essence: Rejoice when there is among your brethren someone who is harsh and rough, for he brings forth the sleeping serpents hidden within you — anger, pride, vainglory, impatience, lack of endurance, weakness of love, and inability to forgive. Elsewhere, he says that the edges of stones are sharp and cutting at the river's source, but on their journey toward its mouth, they are gradually broken down as they strike one another under the force of the rushing water. With time, they are polished until, at the river's end, they become smooth and beautiful pebbles.

Rejoice in your cross, and carry it with courage and patience, that you may partake of beauties you never imagined.