

The Christian Approach to Crises, Part One *An Interview with Metropolitan Saba (Isper)*

Question: The media always talks about crises. Is there a Christian definition or concept of crisis?

Answer: The word “crisis” indicates simply that something is wrong and unnatural. Crises vary depending on the problems that cause them. The accumulation of problems is what constitutes a crisis. A crisis is more dangerous than a problem because it can make a person lose focus and become distracted, which can make it difficult to deal with problems effectively. From a Christian perspective, crises are a sign of the presence of sin in the world.

Q: According to Christianity, is man in crises predestined or free to choose?

A: This question deserves a more detailed answer. In short, Christians do not believe that man is predestined. God has given us freedom, and He will judge us on the Last Day. If we were predestined, why would God judge us? If He had already decided everything for us, there would be no need for judgment.

Q: Since we believe, according to Christianity, that crises are the product of our wrong choices, how can a person avoid these and know God’s will in his life?

A: In fact, this topic is considered one of the most difficult and delicate topics, and it needs spiritual discernment. There is a beautiful word in one of the Gospel texts, where Christ, before the Passion, asks the disciples to keep watch with Him (Matt. 26:38). He came back to them after His prayer and found them asleep. They could not watch with Him, yet he said to them: “Watch.” The Church Fathers interpret this word as “vigilance.” It is important for the Christian to train himself to be spiritually vigilant, that is, to be quickly sensitive to God’s will, His word and to any movement that happens to him. The Lord says: “The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak” (Matt. 26:41).

When a person is vigilant and his spiritual discernment is sharp, he can distinguish between things, and he can realize the evil in an event or the lesser evil in other, and so on. The spiritual fathers of our church, whom we consider the most vigilant in the Church, teach us that the virtue of discernment is the most important of virtues. To discern means to know the will of God, or what is pleasing to His will.

Q: In the Lord's Prayer, we pray: "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one." What is the importance of this petition to the Lord?

A: First, we need to understand its inner meaning. The literal meaning is not what is meant; that is, not to enter into any temptation. Such a thing cannot be realized on earth. Temptation also has a positive side: it strengthens, intensifies and increases a person's awareness. Many times, a person is lost and reckless, so temptation comes to him as a strong slap to wake up from his sleep and return to his senses.

The meaning of this petition is that the temptation should not be more than our ability to bear it, because the evil one is crafty. He fools us with many tricks, so we ask that the temptation not be harder than we can bear. In fact, most believers experience that God does not allow a temptation that exceeds our power.

Q: In the Epistle of James (1:2-3), we read: "Count it all joy, my brethren, when you meet various trials, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness." How can a Christian live through a crisis with joy?

A: I will give you an example that I have recently read about. It is a contemporary example; I will not give you one from ancient events or cultures. There was an Anglican priest from New Zealand named Michael Lapsley who lived in South Africa during the era of apartheid between blacks and whites. This monk, driven by his faith, resisted the brutal apartheid system – of course, with non-violent resistance because he was a Christian and a monk. His influence spread and expanded, so the authorities expelled him from South Africa, but he continued his struggle from exile. The regime did not leave him alone; it sent him a letter bomb that exploded on him, costing him his hands and one eye. Of course, a large number of shrapnel entered his body. He stayed in the hospital for seven consecutive months, and then he continued a long treatment for two years, to practice for managing his new life. He continued his struggle despite his new situation.

When the apartheid system ended, he returned to South Africa and established "The Institute for Healing of Memories" to bring together whites and blacks together, where they confessed their pains and mistakes towards each other. This was a way of healing through forgiveness and liberation from the horrible past. He continued his activity without stopping. He said about himself: "This test [the explosion] was like a real purification of myself." He also said: "I was resisting

apartheid and segregation between blacks and whites with great stubbornness and rigidity, but after the blast, I began to feel the extent of softness inside me, and the extent of my understanding of the victim and the executioner together, so that God would use me in establishing these centers.” This is what is meant by the Christian person transforming pain into joy and new ability.

Q: Can you give us examples from the Bible, examples of saints who have experienced crises and pain?

A: We have many examples. The clearest and most famous example that everyone knows is Job the Righteous. How greatly he suffered loss materially, physically, and emotionally. He lost all his children. And in the end, the question remained, why me? But he discovered a richness that he had not realized before. I remember one example about him. In one of the chapters, Job rebukes the Lord for the pain he is suffering, “But now they mock me, men younger than I, whose fathers I would have disdained to put with my sheep dogs” (30:1). This means that he was arrogant and aristocratic before his tribulation.

Paul the Apostle is another example. After he was converted to Christ, he suffered greatly in his life from dangers, toils, imprisonment, shipwreck, and hiding from his people for fear of being killed, and he considered it all as naught in order to gain Christ (2 Cor. 11:25-33). The Bible is full of these living examples that reflect the reality of human life.

His Eminence gave this interview to “Radio Kifo” of the Syriac Orthodox Church.