

**The Sanctifying Dimension, Part One**  
*By His Eminence Metropolitan Saba (Isper)*

Once, a woman said to me, with the tone of someone who had just discovered something incredible: “At your request, the parish priest came to our home and offered the Service of the Sanctification of Water. Truly, the evil spirit has left the house, Your Eminence, and we are no longer experiencing strange occurrences.” She had told me that a series of evil events had been taking place in their home, and they did not know the cause. She was not convinced by my answer about the cause—although she is a woman with advanced academic degrees, and she and her husband are deeply committed to their faith and their church.

This is the condition of many people for whom faith has become an ideological, intellectual conviction—mixed with religious practices—while the living sanctifying dimension is absent from their lives, practically rather than merely theoretically.

The sanctifying dimension of life is essential to Christian faith, and it is the Church’s function, especially through the liturgy. That our lives be sanctified does not mean that they are limited only to good deeds and virtuous behavior. This path is certainly necessary for those who believe in the Gospel teachings. But the presence of God and His action in life—His effect upon it, and its transformation into a true fullness from Him—is an indispensable matter of faith, if we desire a truly living faith.

The liturgical dimension is among the foundations of faithful and vibrant Christian living. It is indispensable and cannot be replaced by something else. The world in which we live is saturated with the evil spirit, and nothing removes it except the Spirit of God. From here, we understand the priestly function in the Church: the priest is the person established, by divine grace, to be a means for sanctifying life and drawing down the grace of God. And when he says to someone, “May God bless you,” his words have real effect; they are not merely a pious wish.

From this angle we also understand the liturgical sacraments. Baptism may unfortunately be merely a social event for some; yet their lack of awareness of its spiritual action does not negate it. It is a true new birth, in which the baptized

becomes a child of God and receives divine grace that preserves him—if he preserves it—from the evil spirit and its works.

Through the Eucharist, Christians receive Christ Himself: He dwells in them, sanctifies them, and gives them spiritual strength by which they confront the evil powers that continuously wage war against them, seeking to distance them from their Lord and cast them into sin, so as to rob them of salvation and lead them to spiritual death—and even bodily death in some cases. And so it is with the rest of the sacraments.

According to Orthodox faith, the divine sacraments are not limited to seven, as legal catechesis shaped by Western thought often teaches. Rather, every prayer service that a priest performs at the request of a believer is, in a real sense, a sacrament. These prayerful services touch the lives of believers in all their details: from the blessing of water and the blessing of the home with it, to the service of Holy Oil and anointing the sick with it, to the blessing of a new car, to prayers for a child when he goes to school for the first time, and so on.

The believers live by the grace of God, and they express their longing for it through these prayerful acts which sanctify their life in its entirety. In this way they live, always drawing upon divine grace. The sanctifying dimension is not merely a ritual composed of a few actions, nor is it a talisman like those some people hang around their necks. It is a sanctifying act for which the believer asks, and that is performed by a canonical priest who has received—through the Holy Spirit—the grace of the priesthood, so that he may sanctify our lives.

A sacrament is the presence of God in an unseen manner, yet one that is felt by believers who experience it.

Unfortunately, this concept has largely disappeared in recent years. Faith for many has become a mental conviction of certain doctrines that then “require” a particular lifestyle with specific spiritual practices—by which one simply “fulfills a religious duty.”

If knowledge is essential for believers—and if it requires discernment between conscious faith and superstition—this discernment does not mean turning the spiritual life into a matter of principles alone. Faith touches every dimension of the human person: the intellectual, the spiritual, the bodily, and the practical.

A person does not live by intellectual convictions separated from life. True faith is the living embodiment of these convictions in daily life.

Even priests have become estranged from this concept. Their sanctifying ministry has weakened greatly, and for many it has come to be limited to fulfilling the “duties” of the Divine Liturgy, baptism, funerals, and weddings—treated as necessary religious ceremonies. For example, the blessing of homes at Theophany has become a burden that some consider heavy and therefore neglect. So how much more the Service of the Sanctification of Water in a home when the need arises?

We are witnessing an unconscious deviation of priestly ministry from its essential function—and it is being replaced by social services and various activities that do not fall under sanctification and are not the heart of the priest’s work. Any work a priest does apart from his sanctifying ministry is not the core of his vocation. By “work” here I mean administration, accounting, and various social activities, including charitable work. These have come to occupy most of his time and ministry, and because of them, he enters into conflict with the faithful, thinking they are diminishing him when they fulfill their own role and duty. There may be occasions when necessity calls him to work in this area or that, but he must remain aware of the importance of handing such tasks over—at the earliest opportunity—to those in his parish who are qualified, so that he may devote himself to the ministry of confession, the other sanctifying services, visiting the faithful, and nourishing his own life of prayer.

Why have we reached this low point of the absence of sanctifying life? The reasons are many, and there is no room to enumerate them here. But responsibility falls on all of us. The home is the first and primary educator. Whoever grows up in a household devoid of piety will find it difficult to live and understand piety when he becomes older, even if he becomes a priest or a monk. More so the believer living in the heart of society!

Perhaps cultivating the spirit of piety—which makes a person alert to the presence of God at all times—is among the greatest needs of the human person today. Truly, what does it profit a person if he gains the whole world and loses himself? What does he offer himself if he lives far from God, even if he bears God’s name and fights for Him? Life with God is first experienced in the

heart, before anything else. God addresses your heart and touches it, and you are changed to become like Him; otherwise, you are deceiving yourself that you belong to Him.

You truly belong to Him when you give Him your heart. And the heart, in the Christian spiritual understanding, is the whole being. When the grace of God touches your heart, you leap for joy like a deer, and you want this joy for the world around you. Begin to sanctify your life and nourish yourself well on the abundant graces God has given to your Church. Live them. Activate them. Do not be content with social-religious appearances, which often become the very reason your heart is walled off so that the grace of God does not enter it.