

## **The Blessing**

*By Metropolitan Saba (Isper)*

Father Dmitri Dudko (a Russian priest who was arrested and tortured with electric shocks in the late 1970s) tells the story of a seven-year-old girl who once came to a church asking for the sacrament of confession. Father Dmitri marveled at the little girl and asked to himself, “What sins does this angel have to confess?!” However, her attitude, which was revealed in her conversation with the priest, was very powerful and prompted her to shed tears of spiritual joy, stemming from the pain of the Cross and the hope of the Resurrection, at the same time. The sin she wanted to confess was having to wear the handkerchief of the atheist “Pioneers” organization (an obligatory school organization for children during communism in the Soviet Union) around her neck while she was in school. However, she remedied the situation by dipping the handkerchief in the holy water basin, which is in the church, before coming to the priest and asking his blessing to put the handkerchief around her neck.

This child’s behavior indicates true, authentic, and ingrained Orthodox piety in her family. Otherwise, how could she do what she did, in light of the strict monitoring of the churches by the “Pioneers” during that period? Orthodox upbringing teaches us to seek the Church’s blessing before undertaking any important work. The true believer does not undertake any important action without prior blessing. This is an important tradition in the Orthodox Church.

The relationship that binds believers to their spiritual fathers is a familial relationship in the spiritual sense. From here, the believer seeks the blessing of the Lord, which he finds in the blessing of his spiritual father. This protects the believer from deceptive pride and protects him from personal moods and pathological delusions. Self-reliance, on the spiritual path, exposes a person to fall into the trap of discretion, so he does what he inclines himself to do and what is in accordance with his mood and nature, even if it is harmful to him, whether he knows it or not.

This discussion leads us to a little insight into our current spiritual reality. The relationship that is supposed to be established between the believers and their shepherds is a spiritual relationship that aims at the salvation of all. The shepherd’s main concern is the salvation of his flock, one by one. From this standpoint, he takes care of them with love, tenderness, and patience. Their salvation is before him at all times. For their salvation, the priest draws up his plan and guidance. He is a spiritual father, first and foremost. And if the world is reducing the Church to a

social institution, and priests, to social workers, then the clergy and laity must correct this misperception.

The Church is a spiritual hospital and a ship of salvation. Following the example of her master, she seeks to heal the sick, feed the hungry, and do everything involved in what we call today the betterment of humanity and society. But, following the example of her master, she is also called, before anything else, to the salvation of souls, the forgiveness of sins, and the healing of souls and bodies. “Your sins are forgiven,” the Lord Jesus said to the paralytic before He healed Him of his physical infirmity (Mark 2:5).

The true believer seeks God’s blessing through the Church before anything else. Acts of love are an embodiment of man’s total commitment and a visible expression of man’s spiritual salvation. But if the Church fixates on this visible level of expression, then it becomes an institution of this age, and it loses the ability to provide true consolation. By virtue of its formation, as the living Body of Christ, the Church is not an institution of this world, regardless of how highly it is viewed by society. Her calling is to return this world to the bosom of God, its Father, and to restore the lost Paradise. It is a place in which the Kingdom of Heaven must be experienced, through which Christ opens the Kingdom’s doors to humanity. Otherwise, it is anything but the Church of Christ.

What is called social work today must be at the service of spiritual work, and not the other way around. The love for the sons and daughters of my flock, whom the Lord has entrusted to me—and my gratitude goes to Him—leads me to take care of them with all my strength and ability. My love for them and their salvation pushes me to provide what I can and what the Church can for their needs. Sometimes I may be able, and at other times, I may not; but their spiritual, moral, and psychological care is always within my ability.

Believers are called, in turn, to live in the spirit of salvation and to help their spiritual fathers work for their salvation. One of the signs of deviation among us is that many people deal with the Church as a social place that provides them with human warmth. This is not wrong, but it is not sufficient. The Church is, first of all, a body aiming at the salvation of human beings and all Creation. Most believers want to keep the Church on the ground level. They do not rise to the level of the Gospel, and they do not want the Church to remind them of this lofty call. They are satisfied with the various social and humanitarian activities, believing that they have fulfilled in their lives the Gospel of Christ. Isn’t the clearest sign the decline in the practice of the sacrament of repentance and confession?

When St. John the Baptist sent some of his messengers to the Lord, asking Him, “Are you the One who comes, or are we waiting for another?” Jesus answered them, “Go back and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor are given good news. Blessed is he who does not lose faith in Me” (Matthew 11:5–7).

Many follow the path of salvation, but are there many eyes that see and ears that hear?

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