

On Self-Criticism

By Metropolitan Saba (Isper)

Father Arseny (1893-1973) was a man of prayer and a high-caliber spiritual father. He spent eighteen years in a hard labor camp in Siberia during communist rule (1940-1958). Once, during a heated argument between two ideologically opposed groups of political prisoners, one of the leaders forcefully brought Father Arseny into the argument. The leader asked Father in front of everyone about his and the Church's position on the atheist government that arrests and kills priests, demolishes churches and monasteries, and relentlessly fights the faith. This leader thought he would have fun embarrassing a "stupid" priest.

Father Arseny hesitated to answer. He did not want to engage in the debate, especially since he had not engaged in such debates before. But, under pressure, he made the sign of the cross and began a detailed explanation, the conclusion of which was that the roots of atheism and hostility toward the Church were planted by the Russians' own hands because of "the bad examples demonstrated by the intellectuals, the nobility, merchants and government employees. Yet we, the clergy, were the worst of all." He concluded by saying: "I cannot point the finger at our authorities because the seeds of disbelief have fallen into the soil that we ourselves have prepared. We ourselves are guilty, too. We are only reaping what we sow."

In prison, Father Arseny suffered a great deal of persecution and paid a high price for his disposition. He presented an honest example of non-violence in the face of the terrible suffering he and his people were experiencing. Moreover, he offered a deep analysis of the reasons that led to their suffering.

Our Orthodox spiritual teaching speaks of "self-blame," which is based on discovering one's personal role in transgressions or mistakes, rather than blaming others. We can also call this "self-criticism," which we rarely find in our circles. We tend to blame and criticize others while considering ourselves "innocent of the blood of this just man."

A person does not mature at any level, nor do institutions advance and develop, unless they continuously follow the principle of frequent self-criticism or self-evaluation.

On a personal level, if we're not convinced that we have our share of flaws, and if we don't examine and monitor them closely, then how can we get rid of them? Why do we have the right to see other peoples' faults and slam them when we are full of the same faults? How applicable is the following gospel verse to our reality: "Why do you look at the speck in your brother's eye and do not care about the plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, take the plank out of your own eye first, so that you can see clearly and remove the speck from your brother's eye" (Matthew 7:3, 5).

The true believer criticizes himself first, then denounces the wrong actions of other people rather than criticizing the people. In fact, we have too much experience criticizing rather than critiquing. The difference between the two aspects is huge. Criticism can be based on emotions, anger and complaints. It can be stained with subjectivity and irrationality, so the dialogue becomes insulting and destructive to the other. It can also be based on a superficial knowledge of the matter. Criticism can lack any effort to recognize the reasons that might lead to consequences. Thus, the discussion leads to termination of the dialogue, causing participants to depart carrying nothing but feelings of anger, hatred and dissatisfaction. Criticism can be a negative act because situations remain unchanged. It can be mainly "venting" that is followed by more intense and turbulent emotional surges.

Critique, however, is based on calmness and a deep analysis which investigates the inner core of matters to understand their flaws and the reasons behind them. Critique focuses not on the person but reaching an understanding of the mistakes he committed in order to correct them. Critique has its own components and standards that require strict adherence. It must be constructive and positive to lay out the foundations for evaluation and reform.

Criticism deceives people into thinking that, by directing their anger at mistakes and blaming others for them, they absolve themselves of responsibility. Whereas in critique, the critic can help to improve the state of decline, regression, or corruption.

If our homes were filled with piety and the fear of God, and built on Gospel values and virtues, would they produce opportunists, self-seekers, and the weak? If we raised our children on truth, objectivity, and the meaning of true life, would there be any place for triviality, superficiality, and selfishness? "Do they pick grapes from thorns, or figs from thistles?" (Matthew 7:16).

We frequently encounter criticism of a variety of issues and people, many of which might be true. Yet the important task is inquiring and searching for causes that lead to these issues and reaching solutions to reduce errors and rectify their consequences. Most important of all is claiming personal responsibility for deficiencies and seeking ways to correct them. If we place blame on others, we will remain hostage to what we despise and complain about.

Above all, ask questions and demand answers from yourself. Do not underestimate your role, no matter how minor and insignificant you might believe it is. You do have a part in spreading the culture of constructiveness but start without focusing too much on cultivating results. What matters is that you do your best.

A simple and virtuous mother is incomparably better than an educated mother who lacks virtue. Dedicated schoolteachers who love their students produce a generation of positive students of integrity: a devout priest who is an apostle to others and changes their lives; a polite and ethical worker who contributes to building trust among members of society; a humble and patient intellectual who opens closed minds.

God has given you one or more talents to advance and increase rather than wasting your time gossiping about others while remaining empty and trivial.