

The Broken Church

By Metropolitan Saba (Isper)

The Church, in her visible and human face, is always broken by the sins of her children. She is hanged upon the Cross of tension stretched between her longing for the heavens as a radiant bride without blemish or fault; and the passions, weaknesses, and falls of her earthly members who knowingly or unknowingly stain her garment, hinder her mission, and pull her downward. This is also the image of the Christian. A believer is one who fully recognizes his weakness and his inclination toward sin yet continually strives toward the heights. This is the struggle of a lifetime. He draws from the grace of God and from constant repentance both his hope and his path to salvation. That is why we find, in the lives of the saints, men and women who reached great heights of purity and holiness, yet still, on their deathbeds, begged for a few more days so that they might begin repentance.

The visible face of the Church is revealed through her members. They are human beings who, through their union with Christ the Head of the Church, are united to one another as one Body. At least, that is how it should be. In reality, they are not always this bright image. Their ongoing repentance, which should be their daily way of life, helps them approach that ideal. But in truth, many within the Church, in all her ranks and orders, are caught up in many other concerns more than in the Lord of the Church Himself who is the very reason for their being in the Church at all.

The believers who are still living in this world are known as the “Church Militant,” while those who have entered eternal life are called the “Church Triumphant.” Yet the Church remains one; these are only educational terms, not dogmatic distinctions. The “Church Militant,” like every human community, is always vulnerable to corruption and failure. Therefore, she constantly needs spiritual struggle, correction, and renewal. Every human group is susceptible to weakness, and the earthly Church is no exception though she possesses the gift of repentance that can wash away the soot of her children from her face. As the Apostle Paul said, “We have this treasure [faith] in earthen vessels [sinful humans], (2 Cor. 4:7)” not in vessels of steel.

The more her members long for eternal life and begin to live it here and now, the more the Church reflects the image of the Kingdom in this world. Otherwise, everything in her remains of this world, even if wrapped in religious language and called “Christian.” Renunciation of worldliness and freedom from its temptations are essential conditions for the Church to remain faithful to her Lord. Whoever does not believe with certainty that in the Church we are “poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, yet possessing everything” (2 Cor. 6:10) is still far from the mind of Christ, which the Scriptures command us to acquire and make our own.

For many, the Church is seen as an organization to be run by the spirit of this world, since it holds resources, institutions, and influence. They think that as long as the Church has money, property, and administrative structures, her witness is secure. They imagine that material wealth alone can ensure her mission and thus they become careless about how it is obtained, justifying questionable means. They forget that the Lord of the Church provides what is needed when there are pure and faithful hearts devoted to Him. Certainly, earthly goods, when placed in service of the Gospel, can support the Church’s witness and ministry. But they cannot create it. True witness is born only from souls in love with Christ, who have made eternal life their goal.

When the People of God are consumed by earthly concerns, they fall into the trap of forgetting the Giver and losing sight of the goal. When believers rely on their own cleverness, planning, and worldly wisdom as though the Head of the Church (Christ) were absent, they estrange the Church from her Lord, instead of estranging themselves from the world (2 Cor. 5:8). Then, they begin to justify whatever seems profitable or advantageous, even crossing the boundaries of what the canons forbid, offering a thousand excuses. The Church needs saints to remain upright. The saints possess discernment, the ability to distinguish between what belongs to God and what belongs to the world. Only the humble keep the Lord’s voice audible and obeyed within the Church.

If you desire the Church to be faithful and striving, begin with yourself. Change yourself. Purify and cleanse your heart. Listen to the divine Word with reverence. Examine your thoughts and actions daily. Shake off the dust of sin and clothe

yourself with repentance without ceasing. Then you will become a new person able to recognize your Lord's voice and will, to act according to His pleasure, and to pass that breath of life to your brothers and sisters.

Once, a journalist tried to trap Mother Teresa of Calcutta with a provocative question: "What should change in the Church?" She replied with deep wisdom, "You and I." Indeed, as long as believers continue to indulge in easy criticism, casting accusations at this or that person while excusing themselves, the face of Christ in His Church will remain wounded and nothing will change. With their constant criticism, they disfigure His face with their own hands often without realizing it. But ignorance does not excuse responsibility.

Christ is present in His Church: in the Liturgy, in the Holy Mysteries, in lives of virtue, in the patience of those who are suffering, in the joy of the pure, in the faces of those who love, in the struggle of the repentant, in the innocence of the chaste, in the smile of the gentle, in the cheerfulness of the generous, in the simplicity of the humble, in the detachment of the wealthy, in the contentment of the poor, in the integrity of the faithful, in the service of the needy, in the silence of those who are content, and in the hearts of those who are positive. Christ is in our midst, so let us recognize His presence, bear witness to Him, and work so that our sight of Him never fades from among us. Let us be those who light candles instead of merely cursing the darkness.

Then, perhaps, He will forgive our shortcomings and make us part of His little flock.