

The Mind of the Saints

By His Eminence Metropolitan Saba (Isper)

On the feast day of Saint Silouan the Athonite on September 24, I remembered an incident that illustrates how saints who have been touched by divine grace deal with others. In the account of his life written by his disciple, Saint Sophrony Sakharov, we read the following:

We once learned of a conversation between the staretz—the spiritual elder—and an archimandrite engaged in missionary work among non-Orthodox communities. This archimandrite greatly respected the staretz and often came to speak with him during his visits to the Holy Mountain of Athos. The staretz asked him how he preached. The archimandrite, who was still young and inexperienced, became animated, gesturing emphatically as he said:

“Your faith is corrupt. Everything among you is distorted and wrong, and unless you repent, you will not be saved.”

After listening to him, the staretz asked:

“Tell me, Father Archimandrite, do they believe in Jesus Christ? Do they believe in the true God?”

“Yes, they do.”

“And do they venerate the Mother of God?”

“Yes, they venerate her, but their doctrine concerning her is mistaken.”

“Do they venerate the saints?”

“Yes, they do. But what saints can they have after separating from the Church?”

“Do they hold services in their churches and read the word of God?”

“Yes, they hold services and have churches. But if you could only see what their services are like compared with ours—how cold and dry they are, and how devoid of spirit and life!”

“Then, Father Archimandrite, it is good that they believe in Jesus Christ, venerate the Mother of God and the saints, and seek their intercessions in prayer. If you tell them that their faith is ‘corrupt,’ they will no longer listen to you. Instead, tell these people: ‘It is good that you believe in God, that you venerate the Mother of God and the saints, that you go to church and participate in the services, and that you pray in your homes and read the word of God.’ Then tell them that they are mistaken in this or that belief and that they need to correct it. Then everything will be well. The Lord will rejoice over them, and all of us will be saved by the mercy of God, Father Archimandrite. God is love. Therefore, every distortion must be corrected through love. In this way, all those who listen to you and to the word of God will be saved—and so will all who preach to them. But if you condemn them, their hearts will not hear you, and the result will bring blessing to none of you.” (page 77)

Saint Silouan did not condemn those people, nor did he claim that their faith was sound and correct. His concern was their salvation. Therefore, he did not focus on debating their doctrines, but on the manner in which those doctrines might be corrected and brought to completion, so that their faith might become sound and true and thus lead them to salvation.

He did not withhold salvation from them. And how could he, when he understood perfectly well that salvation belongs to God and not to him?

Saint Silouan knew that the path he followed was, in principle, a sure path to salvation—provided that the believer walked it faithfully and with a sensitive attentiveness to the Spirit of God. He therefore desired this salvation for every human being. His distinctive and constant prayer was: “O Lord Jesus Christ, grant that all people may know Thee by the Holy Spirit.”

There is a theoretical knowledge of God that is entirely different from the knowledge for which the saint prayed. It is a knowledge derived solely from texts, which imagines that once it has intellectually understood the truth and chosen to live according to that understanding, salvation is already within its grasp. Saint Silouan teaches us that true knowledge of God does not come through information, however sound, profound, or precise it may be. Rather, it comes when the Holy Spirit touches the person who has been purified and cleansed, who has opened his entire being to the Holy Spirit and placed God's will in the place of his own. Such a person becomes wholly concerned with the salvation of all people and suffers whenever he encounters someone who does not desire to know God or the true life, but instead follows a mistaken path.

Saint Silouan did not personally encounter on Mount Athos the challenges posed by adherents of other confessions, religions, and philosophies, nor did he engage in defending the true faith before them. Nevertheless, throughout his life in general, and in this incident in particular, he clearly reveals that the genuine correction of anything is accomplished not through condemnation, but solely through a spirit of love.

This teaching of Saint Silouan did not originate with him. Neither did it come from universities where he had studied, nor from the movements that considered him a defender of the church or the Orthodox faith. It came directly from God—from his experience of the Holy Spirit, who touched him many times.

He saw Christ alive “in the place where the icon of the Savior stands, in the Church of the Prophet Elias, located at the monastery mill.” This divine appearance occurred at the beginning of his monastic journey, and divine grace touched his entire being. After some time, divine grace visited him again, though with less intensity. From that point onward, God began to “play” with him—at times visiting him and at other times withdrawing—so as to mature him and help him grow until he attained “the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.” (Eph. 4:13)

With every luminous experience, he grew in humility. Not once do we read, either in his own writings or in the writings of those who knew him and wrote about him, that he considered himself entitled to speak about why divine grace is bestowed upon some or withheld from others, whether because of mistaken belief or a wayward life. Through genuine and living experience, he truly knew that God alone bestows His grace or withholds it for reasons known to Him alone.

It never occurred to our saint to interfere in the work of God. Through its visitations, divine grace transformed him into a creature overflowing with meekness, tenderness, and love. Thus, he sought only one thing: “that all the peoples of the earth might know God by the Holy Spirit.”

He knew with certainty, from experience, that the person who had not been touched by this grace could still be his brother. He often repeated: “The Holy Spirit is love, and He grants the soul the ability to love—even to love one’s enemies. Whoever has not acquired this love does not yet know God.”

He also said: “The person who ‘only believes’ has not yet experienced within himself the touch of grace and has not clearly ‘tasted’ eternal life. He may preserve himself from sin in proportion to his love for God, but his love remains far from perfect, and he may still cause sorrow to his brother.”

(*Saint Silouan the Athonite* by Saint Sophrony Sakharov is available at [SVS Press](#) and [Ancient Faith Store](#).)