

The Priest, According to Metropolitan Georges (Khodr)

By Metropolitan Saba (Isper)

His Eminence Metropolitan Saba Isper once presented a three-part lecture based on the teachings of one of his spiritual fathers. "The Priest, According to Metropolitan Georges (Khodr)" delves into the mindset of one of the giants of the Church of Antioch. Metropolitan Saba surveys the sermons (listed in the footnotes) of Metropolitan Georges about the priesthood. The first part is presented here.

Following in the footsteps of the Church Fathers, specifically St. John Chrysostom, Metropolitan Georges Khodr envisions the priest as Christ's ambassador. While Chrysostom discusses the ambassador's propriety of whom he represents, Metropolitan Georges emphasizes the need for the priest to veil his own persona and fully embrace his assigned role. "An ambassador is a delegate who does not speak on his own behalf or take personal positions. Instead, he faithfully conveys the message entrusted to him, even if he has differing opinions or evaluations about the country where he was assigned. If his own perception leads him to express views different from his mission, then his authority is revoked, for he has no such privilege."¹ According to this analogy, the priest bears the "delegation of the gospel" with utmost responsibility.²

Thus, the divine word is delivered without any additions. "No one has anything to add to the divine word. Priests are tasked with explaining and understanding the word, interpreting it, savoring it, and living it alongside those who serve the sacraments. However, our Fathers never claimed that they had added anything to the word of God."³

In his sermons addressing the new clerics, Metropolitan Georges underscores two essential prerequisites, in his view, for conveying the divine word: knowledge and personal purity.

Knowledge demands a devotion to reading and continuous education. A priest does not share from his own ideas but from what he has received and internalized. "You cannot effectively convey anything to anyone until the words of God dance in your mind and hold you in rapture, meaning that the word should be ignited with love

¹ We are Christ's Ambassadors

² *Ibid.*

³ Preserving Yourself from Idols

to be heard.”⁴ “For the word is not merely recited.”⁵ The priest surrenders himself entirely to Christ, eliminating any traces of lust, bias, or obsession, and is not affected by any human emotion, even of noble nature. So, “how can you offer when you are empty-handed?”⁶

When Metropolitan Georges advocates for knowledge and education, he laments saying, “Why do we monopolize ignorance? Service (*diakonia*) is born from knowledge... Orthodox Christians do not read... Consider that parishes are in dire need of knowledge...”⁷ He frequently quotes the words of the Apostle Paul, “Until I come, devote yourself to reading” (1 Timothy 4:13).⁸

According to him, knowledge is akin to celibacy. Those who seek knowledge must forsake many joys, entertainments, and desires to dedicate themselves to learning. “Enter the austerity of knowledge.”⁹ What is required is not “a knowledge that is simple, but rather interpretative.”¹⁰ Knowledge entails activating the mind. “We do not abandon our minds. We are pioneers in understanding and must provide answers to all queries, showcasing our profound trust in God.”¹¹

Metropolitan Georges reveals the joy of knowledge, asserting, “I cannot think of a joy equal to, or comparable with, the joy of knowledge, except sainthood.”¹² However, he does not overlook its perils. He cautions against the pride that can fester within knowledge, warning, “Beware of the pride of the scholar.”¹³ To them he says, “One of your trials is excessive education. You might spend hours among books engrossed in divine matters while the faithful around you are thirsty for consolation.”¹⁴

While knowledge and education are crucial, Metropolitan Georges emphasizes that they are not the priest's ultimate goals; they serve the “knowledge of the world, which is the Book of God. Without God, there is no interest in knowledge.”¹⁵

⁴ The Word is not Recited but Remains a Wound to the Core

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Perfection is Pursuing Perfection

⁷ Choosing Priests; Service Comes from Knowledge; You are What You Love

⁸ The Good Shepherd Lays Down His Life for the Sheep; There is No Sheepfold without the Word; Be in the Communion of the Saints; Take Control of People through Humility; Enter into the Austerity of Abstinence; You are Master because of Christ; You are What You Love

⁹ Enter into the Austerity of Knowledge

¹⁰ If You Seek Authority, Let it be the Authority of Love

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Remain a Monk after Becoming a Priest

¹³ Preserving Yourself from Idols

¹⁴ To Father Elias Audi

¹⁵ Remain a Monk after Becoming a Priest

"All the knowledge a priest acquires would be futile unless it is employed in the service of the Master."¹⁶ "The parish must be enlightened and saved through knowledge."¹⁷

At first glance, readers might think that Metropolitan Georges doesn't stress piety and worship, as these themes are not frequent in his sermons. However, this misconception dissipates when one encounters his passionate lament: "I fail to comprehend why the scholar is incapable of piety."¹⁸ In numerous instances, Metropolitan Georges calls for piety from every Christian, including priests. Piety and profound worship are foundational principles in his church, requiring no elaborate exposition. "We are a people of prayer. The priest comes from Christ to the people, not the other way around. The church must return to its roots, becoming a church of prayer and knowledge."¹⁹

Metropolitan Georges' delicate sense of the Church's primary role makes him vigilant to every necessity and the trials that may arise when priests do not open themselves to the Spirit of God in purity. In his view, magnificent worship alone cannot replace the pursuit of knowledge, nor do institutional services automatically lead to the service of the Gospel.

On the eve of my ordination, Metropolitan Georges wrote to me, cautioning, "Due to your engineering background, you might tend to emphasize order and structure in all things, and that the contemporary Church should adapt to the institutional logic. While I don't dismiss these aspects, I recognize that all elements, even within the Church, should be integrated to support one another, generating resources for good works. However, congregations can still remain spiritually parched. I understand the distinction between the present age and the age to come, while you are a man of the latter."²⁰

In this reflection, isn't Metropolitan Georges eloquently articulating the profound meaning of the Church, its mission, and spirituality?

Originally published in 2009.

¹⁶ Do Not Brag about What You were Granted

¹⁷ You are Master Because of Christ

¹⁸ To Father Saba Isper

¹⁹ He Who Beholds Christ in His Glory, Serves; Perfection is Pursuing Perfection

²⁰ To Father Saba Isper