

Reflections on Love

By His Eminence Metropolitan Saba (Isper)

On the Sunday of the Last Judgment, the third of the preparatory Sundays before Great Lent, the Church reads to us from the Gospel of Matthew, where God judges people on the Last Day based on the acts of love they have performed toward those in need—whom Christ identifies with Himself when He responds to the inquirers: "You did it to Me." The gospel passage states: "I was hungry, and you gave Me food; I was thirsty, and you gave Me drink..." (Matthew 25).

Is this gospel passage merely about feeding, clothing, visiting, and comforting others? Or does it emphasize that these blessed actions should naturally flow from our human nature, which is created in the image of God? Is this passage simply urging us to perform acts of charity, or is it pointing to something essential about the very structure of human existence?

Saint Sophrony of Essex once gave a lecture at Oxford University. At the end of his talk, the moderator said, "We have time for one more question." A man in the back of the room stood up and asked: "Father Sophrony, could you tell us—who is God?" The saint replied concisely: "Tell me first, who is man?"

In this brief exchange, Saint Sophrony profoundly revealed a crucial truth: God and man are mysteries intertwined, and one cannot be understood apart from the other. Since man is created in the image of God, there is a structural relationship between humanity and its Creator. If God is love, then man, in his truest nature, must also be love.

We often imagine that being created in the image of God means our relationship with Him is purely vertical—a connection between God and man through worship and devotion. While this is true, it is not the full picture. Since we are created in God's image, we are also created in the image of the Holy Trinity. Therefore, the divine image within us—though darkened by the fall but never erased—compels us to live in love. We exist through love and for love alone.

Let us dive deeper into the mystery of the Trinity. The Cappadocian Fathers—especially Saint John Chrysostom, Saint Basil the Great, and Saint Gregory the Theologian—use the Greek word "koinonia" (κοινωνία) when speaking about God. This word means communion, relationship, and fellowship. The Persons of the Holy

Trinity exist in a state of eternal, mutual love, in complete and perfect communion. God's love is not self-contained but outward-reaching, reciprocal, and participatory.

Since the image of God is within us, it calls us to extend our love beyond ourselves—not just vertically toward God but also horizontally toward others. We are called to live in mutual, self-giving love with others, mirroring the divine love of the Trinity.

Let us remember that the Cross consists of two intersecting beams—one vertical and one horizontal. The Cross is incomplete without both. If we truly seek to live according to the Gospel, we must embrace both dimensions of love—our relationship with God and our relationship with others.

Too often, we fall into the trap of seeing our responsibility toward others as mere obligations—duties we must fulfill as "good Christians." However, when our relationship with God is full, His love naturally overflows from us onto others. Love is not merely a duty—it is the natural fruit of our union with God. The more we commune with God, the more His love within us extends to those around us. Our love for Him cannot be separated from our love for others—rather, it is reflected in them and upon them.

In the Sayings of the Desert Fathers, we find the following story:

Abba Theodore of Pherme once asked Abba Pambo, 'Give me a word, Father.' After some time, Abba Pambo replied: 'Go, Theodore, and have compassion on all. Compassion allows us to speak freely to God.'

Likewise, Saint Isaac the Syrian teaches:

I urge you, my brother, to always let the scales of compassion weigh heavier in you, so that you may feel in your heart the same mercy that God has for the world.

Orthodox theologian Olivier Clément beautifully expresses this truth:

Agapeic love is not a sentimental whim or a physical attraction, both of which are doomed to fade away quickly, and anyway do not come at will. No. It is the awareness of God's love for another person. Only God can enable us to understand our neighbor according to feeling, the intuition of the Spirit! Then we perceive in him an irreducible personal existence beyond limitations and errors, beyond even the

disappointment we may have felt for a moment. The other is in the image of God, not of us.¹

Saint Diadochos of Photiki, in his book "One Hundred Chapters on Spiritual Knowledge," gives this practical reflection:

When a man begins to perceive the love of God in all its richness, he begins also to love his neighbor with spiritual perception. This is the love of which all the Scriptures speak. Friendship after the flesh is very easily destroyed on some slight pretext, since it is not held firm by spiritual perception. But when a person is spiritually awakened, even if something irritates him, the bond of love is not dissolved: rekindling himself with the warmth of the love of God, he quickly recovers himself and with great joy seeks his neighbor's love, even though he has been gravely wronged or insulted by him. For the sweetness of God completely consumes the bitterness of the quarrel.²

As we approach Great Lent, let us reflect deeply on how love is already rooted in us, needing only to be nurtured and expressed. True love is more than acts of kindness at specific times—it is a constant way of life. Feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and caring for the suffering should not be religious obligations or mere moral duties. Instead, they should naturally flow from the overflowing love that burns within us—a love that reflects the boundless mercy of Christ.

¹ Clément, Olivier. *The Roots of Christian Mysticism: Text and Commentary*. United Kingdom, New City, 2015, p. 278.

² Chapter 15.