

## In Suffering

By His Eminence Metropolitan Saba (Isper)

After Pascha of 2025, I went to St. Nektarios Greek Orthodox Monastery in New York for a few days of spiritual retreat, accompanied by Elder Ephraim of Arizona's book *"Counsels from the Holy Mountain."* At the monastery, I met a pious family from one of our parishes. During our conversation, the topic of *pain* came up, and they told me that one of our priests, in stressing that we must "rejoice in suffering," had unintentionally alienated some young people from him and from the Church.

I corrected the phrase, saying: "I believe the priest meant that as Christians, pain does not prevent us from rejoicing, or we rejoice in spite of the sufferings we endure, not because of them." One of the young men present responded immediately: "I accept that—and I understand it."

From that exchange I wish to reflect briefly on the importance of precision in expression when presenting the Christian message. Often, we intend to convey true teaching, yet through our human, linguistic, or cultural limitations we end up saying something that contradicts our own intent.

The Christian faith affirms that God is not the cause of evil, yet much of our spiritual literature emphasizes accepting trials and pains as sent from God. How can these teachings be reconciled?

First, I must say that there is much confusion about what we mean by the "Fathers of the Church." Not all whom we call "Fathers" are of the same kind. Some are called *Teachers* of the Church — such as St. Basil the Great and St. Athanasius — whose writings are doctrinal, written to explain or defend the faith. Others are *spiritual guides*, such as St.

Paisios of Athos, St. Joseph the Hesychast, and others, whose words are pastoral, directed to the healing of souls.

We therefore need discernment when reading their works. When a holy father writes about doctrine or dogma—clarifying or defending the faith—his teaching is universal and objective. But when he offers *spiritual counsel*, it is personal, intended to comfort or strengthen a particular struggler to help that person endure a trial, whether spiritual or material.

For this reason, we cannot extract isolated sentences from any spiritual father’s counsel and use them to build doctrinal positions. Much of today’s confusion arises from mixing *personal spiritual guidance* with *dogmatic teaching*.

Orthodox spiritual life is characterized by dealing with each person according to his or her need, capacity, and spiritual maturity. The general rule is applied with wisdom and discretion, according to what the spiritual father perceives to be beneficial for that person. Thus, the great spiritual elders show flexibility in applying general principles. But those who attempt to become “spiritual fathers through books” often fall — and cause others to fall — into serious errors.

We believe that the source of evil and suffering lies in the fallen state of humanity. Christ came and accomplished our salvation so that we might return to the paradisaical condition for which we were created. Therefore, God is not the sender of suffering, disasters, or misfortunes; these are the consequences of sin that dominate our world.

Yet we also believe that when we entrust our lives completely to God, we accept all that happens to us as His *permission* for our own good. The word “permission” implies that God is able to prevent evil if He

wants to intervene. As St. Paul writes, *“All things work together for good for those who love God”* (Romans 8:28). In this way, we live in peace despite tribulation, drawing spiritual strength to face, overcome, and even benefit from our trials. Such an attitude requires great faith and near-total surrender — but it is the best path for confronting every kind of distress.

The Book of Proverbs says, “My son, do not despise the Lord’s discipline or be weary of His reproof, for the Lord reproves the one He loves, as a father the son in whom he delights” (3:11-12). The word translated as *“discipline”* in Greek (*paideia*) literally means education or training — the upbringing of a child through command, advice, reproof, and sometimes punishment. For this reason, some modern translations render it as *“corrects”* or *“reproves.”* In Arabic, *ta’dīb* carries the same sense—refinement or correction, a gentle form of blame or chastisement intended for improvement.

These two verses present divine discipline as an expression of paternal love, not hard punishment. In the Christian understanding, suffering accepted with trust in God becomes a form of divine pedagogy, by which means He guides His children toward wisdom and righteousness.

In this positive context, Christians see the trials that befall them—and that they accept in surrender to God—as occasions to draw strength and inner peace. This is also what spiritual fathers do when they comfort and strengthen their spiritual children.

In the same spirit, Elder Ephraim offers words of personal consolation to his own disciples. Let us read some of his comforting counsels, remembering that each must be understood within the broader pastoral context in which he and other holy elders speak.

“How much a person loses when he suffers and forgets his sonship, failing to realize that he is being disciplined as a child of God.” (p. 13)

“Trials come to teach us to become bearers of hardship, trained fighters, followers of Christ who was crucified for us, brothers of all the saints who walked the thorny path of the Cross... the faithful, through keeping the holy commandments and enduring the trials brought by the world, the devil, and the flesh.” (p. 19)

“Trials come to bring us closer to God, for tribulations sadden and darken the heart, making it soft, smooth, and humble.” (p. 20)

“He who bears his sorrows with joy and understanding is freed from his sins and their punishments. A spiritual mark is created within him; he becomes compassionate, humble, meek... But the one who lacks true understanding of his trials falls into sadness and depression when he should rejoice—for he walks the road of Golgotha with the saints.” (p. 20)

“Trials of every kind purify the person who accepts them with wisdom and understanding. Every trial that befalls a Christian is a divine visitation for his salvation, sent by the sweet right hand of our heavenly Father, even though our nature does not like such things—just as a sick man does not enjoy bitter medicine.” (p. 23)

“A doctor causes pain to a sick person—through surgery, bitter medicine, even amputation—not out of malice, but for healing. Likewise, God, the Physician of our souls and bodies, heals us through every kind of remedy, trial, and pain, to grant us spiritual health in the highest possible degree.” (p. 33)