

The Great Trial of the Recent Earthquakes and Our Human Accountability*

“God is not the author of evils.”

“Nothing evil comes from Him Who is Good”

(St. Basil the Great, *Patrologia Graeca*, Vol. XXXI, cols. 329A, 345C)

The article was originally published in the wake of the earthquake that rocked Athens in October of 1999, causing widespread destruction, including massive damage to the main church at the Monastery of Sts. Cyprian and Justina in Fili. Although it was written specifically to provide a theological perspective on the then recent earthquake, it is applicable to our proper understanding of natural disasters in general.—Trans.

The recent sudden and powerful earthquakes of September 7, 1999, which struck the northern areas of Athens primarily, caused extensive damage, great misery, and many deaths. But since they also provoked much discussion, and even more misunderstanding—especially on the part of those who have only a superficial grasp of the ethos of the Orthodox Church—we have attempted, in what follows, to provide a brief historical and theological approach to these events.



I. A Brief Account and Initial Assessments

OUR HOLY MONASTERY, located as it is very close to the epicenter of the earthquake, was literally shaken to its foundations, and during the first fifteen seconds it experienced some truly frightening moments. But glory to God, Who loves mankind, no essential damage was done and none of the Brothers suffered any injury.

Immediately after the first shock to the buildings and our psyches, our Brotherhood hastened to celebrate the holy service of Vespers (it was around 3:30 p.m. when the ground first began to tremble), after which we conducted the appointed service at the occurrence of an earthquake: On bended knee, we all besought our Lord that he might, in His love for mankind, relent, take pity on the world, and bring to an end the terrible earth tremors caused by continuous subterranean aftershocks.

The successive tremors that ensued during the following days caused a fissure, extending from southeastern Parnetha and running directly through our monastery. The ground gave way very slightly and the structure of our large public Church—at

least half of which had been built according to inadequate building standards and the foundations of which were decaying—sustained very severe damage in the apse.

For reasons of safety, we ceased using this Church, as dangerous tremors continued, and their repercussions could not be predicted. And since the Patronal Feast of the monastery was close at hand, and the hazardous section of the building was due to be demolished (so that we could erect a new, safe, and even more commodious Church), an attractive and suitable prefabricated Chapel was constructed in the forecourt of the monastery, in order to meet our immediate liturgical needs.

Still, from the very first moments of the events of September 7, the attention of our Brotherhood, guided by our Abbot, His Eminence, Metropolitan Cyprian, was turned towards our earthquake-stricken brothers and sisters in Christ in the localities of Fili, Ano Liosia, and Archarnai (Menidion), who suffered, and continue to suffer, very severe hardships. His Eminence's paternal support, words of encouragement, material assistance, and prayer boosted their morale and raised their hopes.

Other religious institutions were also very hard hit: among them were the venerable Convent of the Dormition of the *Theotokos* (the “Parthenion”), in the district of Thrakomakedonai, which suffered enormous damage, and also another historic Convent, that of St. Paraskeve (under the direction of Abbess Makrina), in the district of Acharnai, which is under the jurisdiction of our Most Reverend Metropolitan. We take this opportunity to express to these convents our deepest sorrow, and we pray that their reconstruction and renovation will advance, by God's Grace, at a very rapid pace.

In the meantime, many of the faithful—clergy, monastics, and laity—, both at home and abroad, and even those from New Calendar Churches, have hastened to show us their support in various ways, including financial contributions for the earthquake victims, as well as for the reconstruction of the monastery's public Church. We have been moved, and at times amazed, by their spontaneous, sincere, and manifest love, and on this occasion we publicly express our heartfelt Christian gratitude to them.

II. *“Sin is the primary evil; this, above all, deserves to be called evil”¹*

Many people, and at times, unfortunately, the children of our Church, are wont to characterize major upheavals of nature (earthquakes, landslides, floods, frosts, droughts, etc.), which destroy the environment and cause accidents, as “acts of God” (“*θεομηνίες*”), thereby (wittingly or unwittingly) ascribing **natural evil** to God.

However, the ascription to our Lord of a human passion, insofar as “*θεομηνία*” signifies the anger and wrath (“*μῆνις*”) of God (an expression and display of Divine wrath), takes us back to the pre-Christian world, which believed that God was hostile to and wreaked vengeance on human beings. By virtue of this idea, **the weight of responsibility for natural evil was transferred to our Lord and God.**

Now, is this a Christian, let alone an Orthodox, view?



The Orthodox Church teaches that **man is entirely responsible for the disorder of nature**: the Fall of man in pre-meal Paradise had pernicious consequences for the cosmos. The rupture of man's communion with God, by reason of his desire for equality with God through the "*gospel of the serpent*," unsettled creation and disturbed its equilibrium.

At the same time, moreover, ancestral sin also distorted man's sentiments towards God; whereas previously love towards his Creator, sacred awe, knowledge of God, and mutual dialogue prevailed in man's heart, fear, confusion, and a desire to "hide" from the Lord now came to predominate:

And they heard the voice of the Lord God walking in the garden in the afternoon; and both Adam and his wife hid themselves from the countenance of the Lord God amidst the trees of the garden.²

Hereafter, God was conceived, not in a personal way, but as an irate, hostile, and vengeful Higher Power; "*perfect love*," which "*casteth out fear*," was banished, and fear came to prevail—and "*fear hath torment*."³ Consequently, we talk about the "*wrath of God*" and "*acts of God*," and the fury of nature is ascribed to God, from Whom the more audacious even "*demand explanations*"!

However, our Lord is **Goodness Itself** and the source of goodness; He is Goodness. Our Savior Christ revealed God to us as a compassionate Father,⁴ and the Disciple of Love proclaimed that "*God is love*";⁵ the Holy Fathers teach us that "*God is not the author of evils*"⁶ and exhort us, through St. Basil the Great:

'Cease being disgruntled at the dispensations of God, and do not consider God to be in any way the cause of the existence of evil,' but let this one dogma inhere in our souls: that nothing evil is done by Him Who is good.⁷

Not only is the All-Good God not responsible for natural evil but, by means of that which is due exclusively to mankind, He intervenes, restrains, "*shortens*,"⁸ and "*curtails*" "*the increase of wickedness*"; that is, He limits the results of "*true evils*," since the real and "*primary evil is sin*."⁹ St. Basil the Great makes the following remarks on the point at hand:

'For this reason, epidemics in cities and nations, droughts, barrenness of the earth, and the harsher circumstances in the life of each individual [curtail the increase of wickedness.]; 'The destruction of cities, earthquakes and floods, the defeat of armies, shipwrecks, and all catastrophes involving many casualties, whether they occur by land or by sea, by air, from fire, or from any other cause,' by curtailing the increase of wickedness,' serve to sober those who survive.'¹⁰

We human beings, with our customary lack of faith, entertain doubts about the ways of Divine Providence, and we impiously say that *“His governance is inconsistent”*; however, we ought humbly to have confidence in the workings of God’s Providence, because *“just as His Essence is incomprehensible, so also are His Will and His Providence.”*¹¹

It behooves us, indeed, to clarify what is meant by the frequent references in Holy Tradition to the *“wrath of God,”* as well as to *“evils”* coming *“from God”* and *“public scourges”* on the part of God. These expressions are **anthropopathic** and are assuredly uttered with **pious intent**, just as, for example, we talk about relations with our doctor. When we do not faithfully follow the advice of our doctor and *“alienate him,”* then he, respecting our freedom, withdraws and retires. Subsequently, on account of the woes that will surely smite us and prompted by remorse and regret over our disobedience, we will admit that *“the wrath of the doctor has caught up with us”*—though the doctor surely bears no responsibility whatsoever for our sufferings.

Furthermore, it is good for us to recognize that, in proportion to the direction in which our free will tends, the Lord “permits” (*“παράχωρει”*) and “suffers” (*“συγχωρει”*) distressing and unpleasant things to befall us, even though it would be possible for Him to prevent them, albeit thereby arrogating our freedom. In such an instance, it appears, at first sight, that God is the “agent,” and His sufferance (*“συγχώρησις”*) or permission (*“παράχώρησις”*) is then called the “cause,” whereas in reality He simply “allows” something; that is, lets us do what we have, of our own free will, decided to do.

“For, Holy Scripture,” St. Nikodemos the Hagiorite explains, *“typically calls God’s permission and sufferance a cause.”*¹²

Therefore, when we hear that *“God has given us up to temptations,”* this should be understood in a pious spirit:

*The ‘gave up’ (παρέδωκεν) as ‘let’ or ‘allowed,’ just as a doctor who assists a sick person, and subsequently sees that person displaying indisziplin in his regimen and disobeying him, ‘gives him up’ to become yet more ill, that is, ‘lets go of him,’ with the result that, by following his own will, the patient does not recover from the disease.*¹³

Consequently, to return to the timely subject of earthquakes, it is indisputable that, in the eyes of the devout, the natural order of things has been disturbed and that creation *“is diseased”* and *“groans”*¹⁴ and, owing to our alienation from the Creator, is in a state of constant turmoil:

*It is because of our indolence that the earthquake occurred; we were lazy and provoked the earthquake; for, the cause of the earthquake is the “wrath of God,” and our sins are the cause of His “wrath.”*¹⁵

And let the faithful not forget that our good Lord always acts *“therapeutically”*:

‘God extirpates what is (truly) evil’ by means of natural afflictions, though ‘the evil does not come from God,’ as ‘a doctor, too, extirpates disease, but does not introduce disease into the body.’¹⁶

In conclusion, the recent earthquakes remind us of the need to return to the “prior good.” And what is this?

“To cleave to God and to be united with Him in love.”¹⁷

We will achieve this when our life becomes a continuous response, in humility and repentance, to our Savior’s invitation: “Abide in My love,” “abide in Me,”¹⁸ so as to say, along with the Holy Apostle Paul: “I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me.”¹⁹



*Source: Άγιος Κυπριανός, No. 292 (September-October 1999), pp. 225-228.

Notes

1. St. Basil the Great, “Homily IX, ‘That God Is Not the Author of Evils,’” §5, *Patrologia Graeca*, Vol. xxxi, col. 337D.
2. Genesis 3:9.
3. 1 St. John 4:18.
4. St. Luke 15:11-32 (parable of the Prodigal Son).
5. 1 St. John 4:8.
6. St. Basil the Great, *op. cit.*, col. 329A.
7. *Ibid.*, §§5, 7, cols. 341B, 345C.
8. Cf. St. Matthew 24:22.
9. St. Basil the Great, §5, *op. cit.*, col. 337CD.
10. *Ibid.*
11. St. John of Damascus, *Dialogue Against the Manichæans*, §§78, 77, *Patrologia Graeca*, Vol. xciv, col. 1576D, c.
12. St. Nikodemos the Hagiorite, Παύλου αἱ Δέκα Τέσσαρες Ἐπιστολαὶ Ἑρμηνευθεῖσαι ὑπὸ Θεοφυλάκτου, Ἀρχιεπισκόπου Βουλγαρίας [The Fourteen Epistles of St. Paul Interpreted by Theophylact, Archbishop of Bulgaria] (Venice: Nikolaos Glykys, 1819), Vol. 1, p. 19, n. 2 (note on Romans 1:24).
13. St. Theophylact of Bulgaria, on Romans 1:24, *Patrologia Graeca*, Vol. cxxiv, col. 356D; cf. St. John Chrysostomos: “He ‘gave them up,’ here, is, ‘let them alone’; “not by inciting them Himself, but by stripping them of His own assistance” (“Homily 3 on Romans,” §3, *Patrologia Graeca*, Vol. lx, col. 414).
14. Cf. Romans 8:22.
15. St. John Chrysostomos, “On the Earthquake and on the Rich Man and Lazarus,” *Patrologia Graeca*, Vol. xlviii, cols. 1027, 1030.
16. St. Basil the Great, §5, *op. cit.*, col. 337CD.
17. *Ibid.*, §6, col. 344B.
18. St. John 15:9, 14.
19. Galatians 2:20.