

Health – Divine Blessing; Illness and Suffering – Academy of Virtues

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Abstract:

The Holy Fathers of the Orthodox Spirituality unanimously consider that pain, suffering, illness and death (as well as their entire range of forms and manifestations) are the consequences of the primal or ancestral sin and of the man's free will that God endowed him from creation. However man misused it. Therefore they are the effects of the initial unfortunate choice made by him.

Sufferings and infirmities, pains and human diseases, they all culminate in death and were totally unknown to the primordial man before the fall in the ancestral sin. At that time he was in a state of perfection or relative perfection, having the capacity to improve it up to deification. By rationally using the faculties he received at creation and by exercising the gift of personal liberty with watchfulness and discernment, man would have been acquired the full resemblance to God.

Referring to this connection between the ancestral sin and the diseases of the first men's descendants, the Orthodox theology teaches that their source lays in the original sin. By inheriting the human nature from our proto-parents, we receive all the positive energies capable of helping man to complete himself and to establish himself in the work of virtues, on the one hand. It means restoring it in a state similar to the original one and leading to union with God. At the same time, we inherit the weaknesses, impotence and death that have entered it and united with its being.

The spiritual writings, as well as the general human experience show that in the Christian life joys and sorrows, trials and sufferings are intertwined. Thus, there is no man who, from the dawn of his life until his end, had only some of them: be it joy or trouble. Moreover, the good Christian noticed that joys which are not lived in a beautiful and pure way will turn into occasions of falling, humiliation and suffering sooner or later. Likewise, the trials that were spiritually confronted bring relief and comfort, holy joy and salvation to the soul in the end.

From a Christian perspective, the attitude towards suffering supposes to assume it in a saintly way and to do the "philosophy of disease" as part of the "philosophy of life". That is to discover the benefits these "involuntary sufferings" can bring to our spiritual life.

The plain and clear teaching of the Eastern Fathers consists of not wishing, seeking or asking for such painful experiences, because we are never fully convinced of our ability to receive and assume them. The physical and spiritual pain-bearing threshold is so different

from one person to another and depends not only on his constitution, but also on his moral creed and philosophy of life. However, the same Orthodox Spirituality recommends that when disease “visits” us, we should receive and bear it with nobility of soul and moral dignity.

Keywords: *Spirituality, Philokalia, illness, sufferings, martyrdom, patience, prayer*

The Orthodox Spirituality teaches that health is a divine gift and, for this reason, it must be preserved and cared for as much as possible. However, as time and life pass by, health is poorer and impotence and disease take the place of power and robustness from the past. But even if physical capacities are more limited, maturity and old age are accompanied by the expansion of our spiritual universe. The enthusiasm of youth can be replaced by the experience and discernment of the elderliness. From a Christian perspective, health is considered to be

a dynamic phenomenon, a continuous homeostasis, and an ongoing effort to balance of the vital processes, spent in the peace of the limbs, without a clinical defect and without us feeling that effort or suffering for this. In a state of health, the existence of the soul and body is consumed alike (Chirilă et alli 2008: 137).

From the same perspective, physical health is defined by anatomic integrity. The functional harmony of internal organs is another miracle of creation. The internal organs work quietly. It is also defined “by its mood to obey the limited - but sufficient - will of man in order to sustain him by what enters and comes out of him, to keep him from danger and to put him in worship movements to God” (Chirilă et alli 2008: 137).

Similarly, the health of the soul is given by the following attributes: to recognize the quality of created being; to freely want the relationship with God; to practice virtues; to have the consciousness of the soul’s eternity; to live with the hope of resurrection in Jesus Christ, the Lord and Saviour (Chirilă et alli 2008: 137).

However, suffering and illness have some rules of attack that are incompletely known and solved by “the medical art”. It can appear not only at the adult or the old person, but also at the young and the infant, even at the barely formed and developing embryo and the disease will increase with him.

For a conscious person, the illness is first and foremost an opportunity of self-knowledge and introspection at any age of life it appears. It is also a moment in which we stop from the rush of this world and from the concerns most often related to an illusory material and physical happiness, in order to discover a rich spiritual level. First, the disease opens a dialogue with ourselves about our present state, our past, and the uncertain future that stands before us. At the same time, it opens up new opportunities of communication with our fellow human beings, whose goodwill the sick person depends on more and more. Suffering brings some people close to God as they seek His help when human support proves to be limited.

In conclusion, the disease opens the prospect of a profound self-knowledge and self-evaluation, which gives man much to meditate on the mistakes - general or personal - that have led to this undesirable state as well as on the possibilities for correction. Therefore, *sickness is an occasion of profound repentance*. With its help, man becomes aware of his vulnerability to such numerous harmful factors, but also of his lack of vigilance to avoid them.

From a Christian perspective, long suffering gives man the chance to discover his sins and passions committed when he believed himself to be healthy, the excesses he subjected his body to and his lack of restraint and discernment. At the end of this internal examination, he has *the chance to change his life* even when he has little time to live, hoping that he will be able to redeem his past sins through deep repentance.

This repentance is often accompanied by crying and tears, as the inner tension is thus exteriorized. But, beyond the purely natural tears, the tried Christian has the opportunity to experience spiritual tears.

The spiritual cry is superior to the natural one and accompanies it. It manifests not because of the loss of this worldly goods, but because of the soul loss. It is an expression of “permanent repentance” and “compunction of heart” and of regret for the sins committed.

Speaking of this gift of spiritual tears which is the expression of purifying the “sky of the heart” from the darkness sin laid upon it, St. Symeon the New Theologian says that it does a double work on the soul:

One is like water that extinguishes the flame of passions through tears and cleanses the soul of the defilement caused by them; another is like the fire that gives life

through the presence of the Holy Spirit and re-lights, heats and makes the heart ablaze and ignites it with God's love and longing (Sfântul Simeon Noul Teolog 1977: 64).

The initial regret for past sins turns into love for God and for salvation, into desire to live only in His company, into tears for God, which St. John Climacus describes in his famous *Ladder of Divine Ascent* as

a sadness of soul, and the disposition of a sorrowing heart, which ever madly seeks that for which it thirsts; and when it fails in its quest, it painfully pursues it, and follows in its wake grievously lamenting (Sfântul Ioan Scărarul 1980: 164).

Depending on its efforts the spiritual mourning has more steps. The Holy Father says the following:

A characteristic of those who are still progressing in blessed mourning is temperance and silence of the lips, and of those who have made progress-freedom from anger and patient endurance of injuries; and of the perfect-humility, thirst for dishonours, voluntary craving for involuntary afflictions, noncondemnation of sinners, and compassion even beyond one's strength. The first are acceptable, the second laudable; but blessed are those who hunger for hardship and thirst for dishonour, for they shall have their fill of the food that does not cloy (Sfântul Ioan Scărarul 1980: 165).

He is accompanied by "the blessed joy-grief of holy compunction" (Sfântul Ioan Scărarul 1980: 167) and brings forth rivers of tears, which soothe and comfort the soul.

Saint John Chrysostom thinks these tears of repentance are "bath and means of purifying the sins" (Sfântul Ioan Gură de Aur 1998: 141) and he also says:

For much as after a violent burst of rain, there is a clear open sky; so likewise when tears are pouring down, a calm arises, and serenity, and the darkness that ensues on our sins quite disappears. And like as by water and the Spirit, so by tears and confession are we cleansed the second time; unless we be acting thus for display and vanity. (...) For I seek those tears which are shed not for display, but in compunction; those which trickledown secretly and in closets, and in sight of no man, softly and noiselessly; those which arise from a certain depth of mind, those shed in anguish and in sorrow, those which are for God alone (Sfântul Ioan Gură de Aur 1994: 84).

God is beside the tried soul in all these trials and sufferings, among tears and weeping and He "consoles those who are contrite in heart" (Sfântul Ioan Scărarul 1980: 178). Feeling this divine help, they can

exclaim: “The abyss of mourning has seen comfort!” (Sfântul Ioan Scărarul 1980: 181).

This state of profound sensitivity and openness to God, to the rich inner and spiritual world and to deep meditation, gives the sufferer the power to carry his personal cross. But, at the same time, it is of paramount importance for the future life, as St. John Climacus says:

When our soul leaves this world, my friends, we shall not be blamed for not having worked miracles, or for not having been theologians or contemplatives. But we shall certainly have to give an account to God of why we have not unceasingly mourned (Sfântul Ioan Scărarul 1980: 185).

At the same time, pains and sufferings, illnesses and trials are occasions to *increase in humility*. The Eastern spirituality considers humility to be “one virtue only which the demons cannot imitate” (Sfântul Ioan Scărarul 1980: 303). The Christian is urged to cultivate this virtue throughout his life. According to some people, the very name of “man” - *homo*, -*is*, comes from the Latin “*humus*”, that means “earth”. The words of Scripture tell about how man was created out of the dust and made live with spiritual breathe. Our faith says: “*For dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return*” (Genesis 3: 19). But we can also give a symbolic interpretation to this etymology. The Earth keeps us all, and no matter how we try to endanger its integrity, selfishly and tyrannically abusing of its resources and causing a real “ecological crisis”, it is home and good host for all of us. The earth gives food to all of us, and for all these benefits it lets us trample it. In the history of Christianity and even of the Romanian Orthodox Spirituality there were Fathers with improved life who asked that after their death they were to be buried under the road leading to the church and to be “trampled” by all those who “sought” the Church, which helped them to humble themselves even after death.

In particular, the limit and difficult situations of life are *opportunities for deep humility*. Sickness is a true “school of humility”. St. Gregory of Sinai identifies two signs of this virtue: “to regard oneself as lower than everyone else, and to ascribe all one's achievement to God” (Sfântul Grigorie Sinaitul 1977: 135). According to the same Philokalic Father the ways that lead to the gift of humble thought are: silence, humble thinking, humble speech, humble behaviour, self-deception, compunction of heart

and taking the last place. The time of illness and suffering is very appropriate for all these to be worked and practiced.

At the same time, assuming sorrows and sufferings is a way to *test our hope in God* and in His super-natural help. Hope is an essential virtue of the Christian and it is absolutely necessary in his struggle against suffering and sickness. It is truly a strong anchor that gives man the strength to face the hardships of life and leads him to the shore of Heaven. Saint John Chrysostom says that “He who has love for the elevated things in his heart and feeds himself with the hope of eternal goods, will not be overtaken by any attempt or annoyance in this life” (Sfântul Diadoh al Foticeii 1993: 448).

Christian hope opposes sadness and despair. The Eastern spiritual writings speak of two forms of sorrow: the worldly one which is sinful, cursed and due to the loss of passing goods, and to frustration of lust and pleasures; and the good or saving sorrow, due to sins and passions committed. The second is a “sorrow after God”, which is combined with hope and joy. “This”, says Saint John Cassian,

makes us obedient and eager for every good work: accessible, humble, gentle, forbearing and patient in enduring all the suffering or tribulation God may send us. Possession of these qualities shows that a man enjoys the fruits of the Holy Spirit: love, joy, peace, long-suffering, goodness, faith, self-control. But from the other kind of dejection we come to know the fruits of the evil spirit: listlessness, impatience, anger, hatred, contentiousness, despair, sluggishness in praying (Sfântul Ioan Casian 1993: 153).

The evil sorrow “of the world” “is a passion that brings corruption in the soul and in the flesh, and touches even the marrow” (Cuviosul Nichita Stithatul 1997: 237). The good one “of God” is useful and saving, it “breaks down the fountain of repentance” (Cuviosul Nichita Stithatul 1997: 237) and generates “patience in labours and temptations” (Cuviosul Nichita Stithatul 1997: 237).

In sickness and especially in chronic and terminal sufferings, the soul of the sick person is somewhat prone to sadness, which takes the form of hopelessness and despair in its paroxystic phases. Besides the support of the close ones: family, friends, doctors and priests, *the strong belief in God* and *the constant hope in His help* is a powerful weapon of struggle against sadness.

When it is in despair, the tried soul sometimes feels abandoned by others and deserted by a God Who seems absent or indifferent to its sufferings. Referring to these states of apparent withdrawal of grace and apparent suspension of its work, which are contradictory for the human soul, St. Maximus the Confessor distinguishes four forms of divine desertion: *from oikonomia* and for salvation, as the Saviour Himself lived on the Cross: *as proof*, in the case of Job and Joseph to demonstrate the soul's strength and purity; *for spiritual guidance* in order to acquire true humility, as in the case of St. Apostle Paul; and *the rejection*, so that the grieved and repudiated one comes back to repentance. Saint Maximus says that however, all these forms "are saving and abund in God's goodness and love of people" (Sfântul Maxim Mărturisitorul 1993: 142).

The same Saint Maximus identifies a grief hidden in the soul, which covers its "depth" and is "the whip of conscience"; and another one extends beyond all sense and is visible from the outside (Sfântul Maxim Mărturisitorul 1994: 307-308). Neither of them is alien and unknown to the soul of the sick person.

St. John Chrysostom thinks that despondency casts man deep into evil, but the confrontation of its attacks is considered to be a true martyrdom of the soul, for "the more pressing it is, the greater the rewards are" (Sfântul Ioan Gură de Aur 2003: 193).

Along with the hope of God's help, *patience* remains an "unwavering stone in front of the winds and waves of life" (Sfântul Petru Damaschinul 1976: 207). By bearing the troubles and suffering, the soul acquires kindness and gentleness, because the physical pains soften the harshness and the hardness and enhance his love for God, who remains His only and true help until the last moment of his life. The face of the person baptized in the fire or furnace of sickness radiates light even during the heaviest illnesses and sufferings, and his soul spreads goodness and love, forgiveness and patience, soul nobility and moral dignity.

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