

Where the Suffering Comes from and What are its Causes

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Abstract:

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.

In Heaven until the fall the first men did not know suffering, illness and pain. The condition they were in was of relative perfection, which they could transform into full resemblance to their Heavenly Father through the good exercise of liberty. They lived the happiness of communion with God and in full harmony with all the creation which served them completely. Man was created in a state of relative perfection, enjoying health both physically, that is the health of a body which fully followed his soul in that state and was also ontologically bound to God, and spiritually. This state of perfect health sprang from his pure and unaltered relationship with God. If man had not yielded to the temptation of tasting the material goods of the created world, but he would have continued to progress in good things by feeding himself from the relationship with God, this state of general perfection and health would have been absolutized and made eternal. There would have been a complete harmony between body and soul in the sense of perfect co-operation, in order to perfect the relationship with God to whom it would have been likened by the work of virtues. The same state of perfect harmony would have been imposed in his relationship with the whole world and it would have ruled between man's body and soul forever, till his full spiritualization as the soul would have overwhelmed the body. Thus man would have manifested his original, priestly vocation as priest of all created things that were "very good" (Genesis 1: 31), and at the same time he would have been deserved the dignity he received as their "master" and "king". By progressing in this relationship with the world and with oneself, man has also been progressed in his relationship with his Father, by increasing his knowledge about God and his union with Him.

Unfortunately, the original sin meant an existential failure which not only produced effects on his relationship with God and the world, but also manifested its effects on man himself - in his two genres: man and woman, who will experience the labour in the sweat of their face, the sorrow of bringing forth children and the suffering and death.

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.

The general point was that if each of us arrives at a time when we can no longer avoid it, the most important thing is to receive it as a "cross of our personal life", as a clue of "our inner establishment" and our moral level of living. At the same time, we must see it as a sign of God's "visitation" and even blessed and happy "election" for our spiritual ascension and salvation.

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.

Beyond seeking or wanting them, the Christian faith shows us what the true Christian behaviour should be in the limit situations of our lives, in times of sorrow and suffering. In this way, it teaches us how to transform painful and sad trials into ways and means of spiritual growth by adding them to the happy circumstances of our existence and by giving life itself a profound meaning and a high moral sense.

Keywords: *orthodox spirituality, sufferings, illness, sin, divine pedagogy, salvation*

By answering to the question: where the illness [From the perspective of Christian medicine, the disease includes several meanings: morphological lesions (inflammation, injuries, lack of substance, benign and malignant tumors, sclerosis, degeneration, atrophies, hypertrophies, etc.); dysfunction of the limbs (hypofunction, hyperfunction, secretions and hypersecretion, peristaltic disorders, dysrhythmia, bradypsychia, functional impotence, psychomotor agitation, cognitive disorders, personality disorders, etc.); imbalance of the relationship between the two constituent elements of the human composition - body and soul (revolt, grumbling, non-acceptance of illness, etc.), vilification of the soul (irritation, hardening of the soul, etc.), weakening of the relationship with God till its breaking (cooling of faith, diminution of prayer, absence of repentance)]. (Cf. Chirilă, Gavrilă, Gavrilovici and Băndoiu 2008: 143) and the body suffering come from?, St. Basil the Great teaches us:

we could say neither that illness is uncreated nor that it is God's creation. No! Beings were created with a natural structure according to their nature, and were brought to life with all their members in a perfect state. They get ill when they lose their natural state of living; their health suffers because of a faulty living or a certain

cause that bring illness in their body. Therefore God made the body but not the disease; He created the soul but not the sin; and the soul could get worst when it alienates from its natural state (Sf. Vasile cel Mare, trans. Fecioru 1986: 443).

Being ultimately rooted in the ancestral sin and amplified by personal sins, the “involuntary” sufferings are signs of the Heavenly Father’s merciful love and evidences of His all-wisdom as well as of His desire to redeem the human race from sin and to save the man. As St Mark the Ascetic says: “the painful events” (Sf. Marcu Ascetul, trans. Stăniloae 1993: 332) or troubles that come upon man are “the fruits of his own sins” (Sf. Marcu Ascetul, trans. Stăniloae 1993: 311) “previously committed” (Sf. Marcu Ascetul, trans. Stăniloae 1993: 332).

Commenting on the Saviour's temptation in the wilderness, St. John Chrysostom presents five general reasons that bring temptation on us following the Baptism: 1. *In order to know the Baptism fruits and the strength to fight the evil, that we received through this Holy Mystery*; 2. *Not to get proud with the Baptism gifts but to live humbly*; 3. *To prove the shrewd devil we renounced him by Baptism, getting away from him permanently*; 4. *For physical and spiritual practice; through trials we become “stronger than iron”* (Sf. Ioan Gură de Aur, trans. Fecioru 1994: 634); 5. *To get an evident proof of the gifts we received and to put them to work* (Sf. Ioan Gură de Aur trans. Fecioru 1994: 634).

The same St. Maximus the Confessor believes that God allows tribulations to try us for five reasons: 1) *Acquiring the power to discern the virtue from sin*; 2) *once obtained by labours and asceticism, virtue had to be preserved*; 3) *Acquiring humble thinking*; 4) *rejection and hatred of sin that created them* and 5) *Awareness of personal weakness and divine help* (Sf. Maxim Mărturisitorul, trans. Stăniloae 1993: 92-95).

St. John Chrysostom analyses the *reasons of saints’ trials or suffering* which are more numerous and more difficult: 1. To be protected from the passion of vain glory or pride; 2. That others may not have an exaggerated opinion on them, and think they are gods and not just mortal humans; 3. That the power of God who helped them may be even more manifested; 4. That the saints be a living proof of their love for God through their patience; 5. To be an opportunity for meditation on death, resurrection and future judgment; 6. That we should all have a moral benefit from the adversities suffered by saints, and keep their example in the sight of our spiritual eyes; 7. That we might be convinced these virtues can be achieved by all of us

and the ideal of holiness is accessible to all of us; 8. That we can make a difference between the true joys and troubles and to understand what happiness and unhappiness really are (Sf. Ioan Gură de Aur, trans. Stoenescu: 1908: 25-26).

For Venerable Nikitas Stethatos, the physical labours balance the excesses committed by man, bringing relief from sins, innocence and joy of the soul (Cuviosul Nichita Stithatul, trans. Stăniloae 1977: 248). Here is an undeniable truth of the spiritual life: the lack of discernment and restraint in youth leads to severe struggles, sufferings and renunciations at maturity and old age. From the Christian point of view, all these weaknesses and infirmities have the role to return man to the virtuous and healthy life.

The Holy Eastern Fathers teach that from a moral point of view, the health of the soul means cultivating the virtues and good deeds. Sin is a state contrary to nature, a paranormal state. Yet, no matter how strong and long-lasting is the soul bondage to sins and passions, it has the power to escape from this darkness and spiritual illness and the opportunity to "come to itself" and to regain its inner health by plucking the sins and practicing the virtues.

Abba Dorotheos, a disciple of St. John Climacus, teaches that everything in our life, good or bad, happens with godly indulgence or oikonomia and with the purpose of delivering us from sin, of multiplying our virtues, and gaining the reward from God. According to this spiritual Father, the reason of our "involuntary" sufferings and troubles is our escape from labours and ascetic efforts, or as he says "if we want to labour a little, we will have small troubles and endeavours" (Avva Dorotei, trans. Stăniloae: 1980: 575).

Many people wish to live a full life and to enjoy every moment, looking for what is pleasant and easy and trying to avoid any form of labour or asceticism. The "involuntary" physical trials and sufferings compensate this absence in the spiritual level, being considered a second form of ascesis, sometimes even more harsh and painful than the first - the Christian ascesis – because this one is absent. In other terms, we can say that if we do not labour when we have the opportunity and it is much easier for us, we will have to do it involuntarily and often when our powers are weaker and impoverished. Therefore, *illness and physical suffering are considered a form of ascesis, leading man at least to the state of spiritual health if it is*

too late for the full recovery of somatic health. In this sense St. John of Kronstadt says: “For the willing pleasure tasted in youth, the involuntary illnesses come in old age” (Sf. Ioan de Kronstadt apud Avdeev, trans. Tănăsescu-Vlas 2006: 17).

St. John Chrysostom reckons that illness is an effect of personal sins, a lack of spiritual discernment and a sign that physical temperance and restraint are absent. He urges us not to be sorry for suffering, but to rejoice because God erases our sins through them and gives us the crown of salvation, adding us to His pleased ones or as the Holy Father says: “The more severe the disease, the brighter the crown” (Sf. Ioan Gură de Aur, trans. Fecioru 2007: 401).

According to the Orthodox spiritual writings, the ultimate causes of all these physical and soul sufferings are: 1) *the original sin* and the perpetuation of vulnerabilities and weaknesses in the human soul because of this sin, that urge man to choose what is simpler, easier and more pleasing to the flesh and to the present life, than to his spiritual wellness and eternal life; 2) *the sins of our parents and ancestors*, which transmit a biologically and spiritually altered gene, and a wide range of weaknesses, from inclinations and predispositions to the worst diseases. It is interesting to note that this “genetic baggage” refers not only to the body, but also to the soul, because in its genetic code - the genome - man receives the qualities of the genealogy tree from his parents or predecessors according to some mechanisms which are not yet fully deciphered even by medical science; 3) *personal sins*, lack of physical and spiritual restraint and temperance, discernment and watchfulness. In this case sufferings and illness are the natural result of personal excesses but, at the same time, they are ways of changing and reorganizing the whole life, in the hope of removing physical pains and sufferings and spiritual remorse. All this suffering can gain a profoundly positive value by becoming healing ways; 4) *the divine “pedagogy” or “oikonomia”* which aims the human salvation, either by gifts and blessings or by trials and tribulations, by oftenly using and adapting one of these two paths: gentleness or harshness, depending on the spiritual state and the reaction of the “sufferer”, but always respecting the essential purpose: his salvation. In this situation there is an alternation between illness and comfort, suffering and relief, trial and consolation, the

moments of “divine desertion” and merciful presence, based on a mysterious oikonomia which is fully known only by God.

The way these alternate and the duration and intensity of moments when the divine help “visits” or “withdraws” are a mystery of God's love for man, whose knowledge and understanding is not always fully accessible to us. Moreover, in such a state, it is not useful for man to question, but to accept his suffering and to seek to improve his spiritual situation in the hope of God's help and its ceasing.

However when the divine mercy seems to be delayed (for reasons hard to understand by the tried man, although this silence and delay will once have an end), in order to alleviate his general situation it is useful for him to compare with persons who are much more virtuous and tried than him. Thus his strength to bear pain and suffering will expand, having the hope firmly anchored in God's mercy and help and in the kindness and reward he will receive from the Heavenly Father.

St. Maximus the Confessor calls the presence of trouble in man's life to be a form of God's “wrath”, but this means that man attracts it and not God. When this happens, the limits of the trials are not despondency and death, but divine all-wisdom and love. Likewise, St. Porphyrios considered that “no! God does not punish, but man abides himself when he goes away from God” (*Părintele Porfirie. Antologie de sfaturi și îndrumări (Elder Porphyrios. An Anthology of Advices and Guidance)*, trans. Munteanu f.a.: 45).

Even when trouble and suffering come upon people, the most important thing to be aware of is that God never lets us to be more tried than our power to endure. The trials, pains and sufferings received are within the limits of nature and proportionate to our mistakes but also to our moral powers, on the one hand, though, by suffering more and more intense pains, man sees his ability widening in order to receive and endure them. What may seem infernal suffering to a person unused to pain, to another person may seem insignificant if he has tasted a lot from the bitter cup of pain.

In addition, each person makes suffering, illness and pain his own and lives them subjectively and personally. And his behaviour and ability to bear and exploit them morally depends not only on his nature or temper, but also on his spiritual beliefs. If, for a particular person, a grief of acute

pain, irrespective of its location, can be the greatest evil and enemy, for another person the most persistent and intense chronic pain can become a means of spiritual exercise and the disease - a friend and an ally in his moral life. However, we will never have the certainty that no matter how much we would have become familiar with these truths theoretically, when we meet suffering, we will look and treat it with the same serenity and detachment.

Limit situations, difficult circumstances in life, trials, tribulations, sufferings and present diseases are not signs of God's abandonment or oblivion, but of His grace and mercy. St. Mark the Ascetic believes that each of us is tempted to give subjective interpretations to events through his thinking and in his favour. But "God alone knows how everything that happens fits every person" (Sf. Marcu Ascetul, trans. Stăniloae 1993: 319); God's wisdom or *oikonomia* are more useful than our ability (Sf. Marcu Ascetul, trans. Stăniloae 1993: 319).

However "God's mercy is hidden" in all these trials and sufferings; "it attracts the one who endures them to repentance and rescues him from eternal torment" (Sf. Marcu Ascetul, trans. Stăniloae 1993: 329).

Pain and suffering is a difficult moral test that man has to pass. Saint Paisios of Mount Athos believed that through them the Christian have "to pass exams at patience in pain" (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Nuțescu 2003: 212. Through his conduct in affliction and suffering, man demonstrates his attachment to the present world and to its illusory and ephemeral pleasures, or, on the contrary, his pure love for God and the hope of future joy and eternal reward. Symeon Metaphrastes says that the test of "various sorrows" is permitted to come upon souls according to God's *oikonomia* in order to reveal those who truly love the Lord (Simeon Metafrastul, trans. Stăniloae 1976: 371).

God shows His loving Fatherhood through all these trials and even if He allows them, He does not do it in order to punish us with harshness, but for our return. He proves to have an *oikonomic* or providential indulgence

because we have departed from Him and we have lain up; He does not seek to crush us, but to correct us, as parents do with their disobedient children: they are angry with their children not to harm them but to divert them from the childhoods and sins of youth towards a good behaviour (Sf. Vasile cel Mare, trans. Fecioru 1986: 406).

God does all things with infinite love and for our salvation, so that in its pains and sufferings the faithful soul feels He “does not overlook the trouble that is happening to us” (Avva Dorotei, trans. Stăniloae: 1980: 610), but He relieves it and rewards us. Much more than being moments of joy and of success, “the troubles and trials are the greatest proof that God the Lover of mankind cares for us” (Sf. Ioan Gură de Aur, trans. Fecioru 1989: 313). The punishments for the sins committed are “God’s care” (Sf. Ioan Gură de Aur, trans. Fecioru 2002: 22), which help us to repent and to be redeemed. St. John Chrysostom thinks that God’s “visitations” are “the educational oikonomia” (Sf. Maxim Mărturisitorul, trans. Stăniloae 1983: 272) which gives us the chance to cleanse our sins for a happy and eternal life.

Whether He forgives us or He “quarrels” and punishes us, the ultimate purpose of these moral “tests” is the recovery of the soul in order to receive salvation, even if it happens at the expense of transient pains and sufferings. Everyone knows that the important things in life which the temporary fulfilment depends on, especially the salvation or eternal happiness, suppose long and earnest efforts, renunciation and struggle. If these labours are valid for this life, they are much more needed for the future happy life. Both through the beautiful and happy ones and through the painful and unpleasant, the same Good Father and Doctor of our souls and bodies supports and helps us. It is He who, just like doctors of men,

when he cares for a sick person, he does not always keep him hungry or let him eat as much as he wants, lest too much food give rise to fever and increase his illness or the lack of food weakens him even more. He does everything he can, thinking about the strength of the patient, and gives him the medicine with care. Likewise, knowing the benefit of each of us, God the Lover of mankind sometimes lets us be well and sometimes brings us trials to test us. If we are virtuous, we will get brighter through the assault of trials and will attract more goodwill upon us; if we are sinners but we receive the endeavour of trials with thanksgiving, thus we will throw away the hard task of sins and will acquire much forgiveness (Sf. Ioan Gură de Aur, trans. Fecioru 1989: 76).

God's help is unseen and mysterious and the believing soul feels it as a power of mercy and a relief of the suffering burden. But to the one who does not understand the high value of these “tests”, it is totally unknown. As St Peter of Damascus says: “the temptations are seen and the help is not visible...” (Sf. Petru Damaschinul, trans. Stăniloae 1976: 226) or St.

Maximus the Confessor: “Only he who knew the weakness of the human nature had the experience of the divine power” (Sf. Maxim Mărturisitorul, trans. Stăniloae 1993: 88).

St Nilus the Ascetic considers God is next to the one who is in distress, by ordering the prolongation or the termination of suffering, according to His all-wisdom. In the first case, He gives the soul “a power that will keep the balance of weakness so we can bear the pain that comes from infirmity and we may also receive crowns for bravery...” (Nil Ascetul, trans. Stăniloae 1946: 216). In the second case, He who is the “Source of salvation and wisdom” (Nil Ascetul, trans. Stăniloae 1946: 216) will put an end to pain and suffering, for relief, rest and eternal reward.

Besides the help of the Merciful God in his struggle against evil and sins and against physical and spiritual pains and sufferings, man has the help of the angels, and especially of the holy guardian angel of his life. Angels serve and strengthen us, secretly comforting our pains and relieving our sufferings (Ioan Carpatinul, trans. Stăniloae 1994: 164).

On this path of saving sufferings, “getting close invisibly, the Lord travels with all who started to walk on the way of His commandments...” (Cuviosul Nichita Stithatul, trans. Stăniloae 1977: 299), being next “to those who want to endure the test for Him...” (Sf. Petru Damaschinul, trans. Stăniloae 1976: 207) and who show patience and hope of salvation.

St. John Chrysostom urges us not to be discouraged and despair even in the most difficult tribulations and sufferings, believing that God has forsaken us, but to seek Him in them and wait for His comfort. He says tribulation is not

the proof God abandoned us or overlooked us! On the contrary, this is precisely the strongest proof God takes care of us. If we have burdens of sins on our back, we will be able to relieve them by showing patience in trials and thanking God. And if we do not have many sins, we will enjoy God's greater benevolence too if we endure the trials by thanking God. Being generous and having great care for our salvation, sometimes Our Master puts waves of trials and struggles in our life as a lesson for us in order to abundantly enjoy His care if we do all that depends on us (Sf. Ioan Gură de Aur, trans. Fecioru 1987: 425).

The troubles sensitize the suffering man, who acquires a greatly expanded opening to the spiritual part of his life, and at the same time they move “the mercy of God” (Avva Dorotei, trans. Stăniloae: 1980: 617). For He is close to the “grievous heart of the one who cries to Him in his

affliction” (Sf. Isaac Sirul, trans.Stăniloae 1981: 139) and He shows “His great love for mankind” to the tried soul, “according to the severity of his sorrows and sadness” (Sf. Isaac Sirul, trans.Stăniloae 1981: 139).

Suffering and pain endured with dignity and contentment lead the soul “to the gate of divine mercy” (Sf. Isaac Sirul, trans.Stăniloae 1981: 52), Christ revealing himself to be “the harbour of our troubles” (Sf. Ioan Gură de Aur, trans. Fecioru 2002: 53) and our constant help and support in the struggles of life.

At the same time, “the involuntary sufferings” testify the moral quality or value and the spiritual strength and value of the one who passes through them, and who faces and overcomes them.

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