

## Sufferings and Illness – Passport to the Sweetest Heaven

**Ioan C. TEȘU**

*Rev. Prof. PhD.  
Faculty of Orthodox Theology,  
Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iași, ROMANIA*

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### **Abstract:**

*St. Paisios of the Holy Mountain, who venerated among saints starting January 2015, is one of the most beloved contemporary Orthodox saints. What made him so loved and cherished were his improved life, his practical and experimental teachings, as well as the many wonderful works he did during his life, among which the most frequent and the highest one was the resurrection of souls from the death of sin.*

*His spiritual words drew attention by their richness and depth, the Athonite Saint giving extremely current advice to the problems and troubles of this world and of the contemporary man, in the Church spirit and conscience. But the same exhortations impressed by their sensitivity, being able to offer answers to the soul, that bring inner peace and give spiritual high meaning. He often used to say he tried to put “sunshine” on the souls troubled by worries and darkened by sins and passions, bringing light and hope and trust in the love, kindness and mercy of the Heavenly Father Who does not enjoy man’s suffering but wishes his salvation, since He created man out of infinite love, and not for sin, chastisement or suffering, but for eternal life and happiness [“I make sunshine” he said and he meant that as the sun is absolutely necessary to open flowers, so a slight pastoral touch helps to open and heal the soul] (cf. Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Nuțescu 2003a: 13).*

*He had to take the cross of suffering in his body because of the colon cancer he asked for, received and bore it spiritually like a real blessing. This was his way to take upon him a part of world sufferings and he made the disease an exceptional way of approaching and uniting with God, by going along with Christ the Saviour through the Golgotha of suffering to His Resurrection.*

*Because his words have the advantage of being uttered by a contemporary saint who suffered himself from this cruel disease and they spring from God’s gift and his own experience, they also have the ability to offer consolation and comfort to the souls “visited” by sickness and suffering. Completely opposite to the general expectations that consider the incidence of cancer or oncologic diseases will decrease, the medical sources tell us they will grow in an alarming and frightening way in the coming years. Therefore, on the following pages, I will try to present some of the rich spiritual meanings that St. Paisios gave to illness in general as well as the ways or means of confronting suffering, as described by the Athonite Father.*

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*Keywords: Spirituality, Spiritual Fathers, St. Paisios, illness, virtues, salvation*

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### **The present world's unrest and the contemporary man's anxieties – causes of physical sickness and inner suffering**

St. Paisios believed that leading away from God, abandoning Christian virtues and throwing with all our might into lusts and pleasures, most of them being evil and inferior, and thus becoming triggers of sins and passions, are the cause of all spiritual and physical sufferings of today's man.

In the past, he said “life was simple and peaceful, and people were patient, but now all are like sparks. They do not bear to tell them a word, and quarrels start from nothing and ugly words are uttered” (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Manolache 2009: 16).

Today man has many “facilities” and means of comfort and ease, but instead of maintaining and enhancing his desire to add the spiritual growth to physical progress, they made him constantly pursue pleasure. With such a mentality, he came to believe that sin is a true “fashion” and something natural and appropriate, while observing the principles of Christian morality is a proof of backwardness and anachronism. And this because, Saint Paisios said, we “levelled” all: good and evil, sin and virtue, high morality and spiritual indifference.

The spiritual Father made a true moral radiography of the contemporary world, and he noticed

the suffering of the world is endless. There is a general decay everywhere in families, both small and large. My heart is chopped every day. Most homes are full of annoyance, anxiety and stress. People are well only in the homes where they live according to God. In the other houses, some people divorce, others are bankrupt, others are ill or injured, and others take psycho-drugs or even drugs. More or less, poor everyone has a pain. Especially now when they have nothing to work; debts come from here, suffering from there; banks pursue them and get them out of houses, a lot of trouble. And it does not last for a day or two. But because of this situation, even the healthy children of these families get sick (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Nuțescu 2003a: 24).

The progress of technique has morally altered man who became increasingly insensitive to the pain and suffering of other people and even indifferent to his own spiritual life and salvation. Being in a permanent

evolution, the scientific development and the latest technologies reduced physical distances, but they also widened and deepened the moral ones. Despite the fact they serve communication perfectly, they are no longer able to bring people into communion. We talk on the phone more and quite often, but face-to-face talks are less and shallower. We have become increasingly skilled in using the technique and keeping up with its “revolutionary” evolution from a physical perspective, but we can hardly understand the mysteries of our soul and of our neighbour. We are even less able to “convert” him, to turn him back and change him from the inferior level of his experiences, through repentance or metanoia, by cultivating superior feelings.

As the machines and cars multiplied, Saint Paisios observed that “the mind became more and more scattered” (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Nuțescu 2003a: 146), the man transformed himself into a machine, and unfortunately his heart turned into an iron one (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Nuțescu 2003a: 146). And if the sensitive soul can be moved by sincere exhortations and pure feelings, such an iron insensitive and swirling soul cannot be moved even by tears.

Today’s man gets away from the simple and moral life, seeking luxury and delight which bring him anxiety and unhappiness. Saint Paisios said that if we want to lead someone away from God, we have to “continually give him plenty of material things and he will forget God and all” (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Manolache 2009: 49). Running after worldly pleasures, he realizes too late that worldly happiness which is so difficult to acquire, and is short and fragile, causes spiritual unhappiness (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Nuțescu 2003a: 76). For, he said, “the more people move away from the simple and natural life and go towards luxury, the greater their anxiety is. And the more they go away from God, it is natural they do not to find rest anywhere else” (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Nuțescu 2003a: 162).

Following the worldly spirit which promises pleasure and joy in the present world and life, man leads away from the Source of his life, listening to and receiving the “evil spirits” (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Nuțescu 2003a: 44), which brings him sadness and general dissatisfaction to all and this is equivalent to hell.

Another time, speaking of this life and the eternal one, worldly worries and the concern about the future things, Saint Paisios showed that

if man forgets all this in his present life, he will lose his time and waste it. If he does not forget and gets ready for the other life, this life makes sense. Everything changes when man thinks about the other life. But when he only thinks how to arrange better here, then he is tortured, tired and condemned (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Nuțescu 2003a: 209).

Today's man cannot receive any advice (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Nuțescu 2003a: 48) because he is proud and self-sufficient and thus instead of tranquillity, anxiety creeps into his soul; sadness and agitation, darkness and death instead of joy. Today's people are

tired, dizzy and darkened by sin and selfishness. Therefore, it is more than ever necessary to have good and experienced spiritual fathers who know how to approach people simply and with genuine love, and to guide them with discernment in order they find their peace. Without good confessors, the churches are emptied and the psychiatry, prisons and hospitals get filled. People must realize that they torture themselves because they are far from God. They also have to repent and to confess their sins with humility (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Nuțescu 2003b: 291).

Pride stops people from thinking about eternity, and thus they no longer grasp the profound meaning of their lives, the vocation of Heaven and eternity.

“The boiler boils”, said Saint Paisios, and the world itself became a “real madhouse” (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Nuțescu 2003a: 164), where the “devil sickles, because people gave him a lot of rights and get frightening devil influence” (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Nuțescu 2003a: 47).

With his prophetic gift, Elder Paisios saw that in the future even greater trials will come to the world and faith due to the loss of the authentic meaning of life and of distancing from God. He said that because of this: “many saints would have wanted to live and labour in our time” (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Nuțescu 2003a: 35). Due to all these shortcomings, “now God allows a strong bang. Tough years will come. We will have great trials” (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Nuțescu 2003a: 35) and “we will see frightening events. There will be spiritual struggles. The holy will be holy still and the unclean will be still unclean” (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Nuțescu 2003a: 36). The evil

that faith will face is comparable to the harm done by communism to Orthodoxy (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Lacoschitiotul 2000: 181). Some of those who face and endure all these trials “will have a pure reward, and others will pay off their debts” (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Lacoschitiotul 2000: 19).

However we should not be scared by all this, but we have to strengthen even more in faith and compulsion, for, according to St. Paisios, “there are some Christians upon whom God relies. There are still people of God, people of prayer, and the Benevolent God endures us, and will provide again” (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Lacoschitiotul 2000: 16-17).

By divine revelation, the old Ascetic showed that now God helps the world more than in any period of its history. He does not leave us regardless of the existing sins, but

guards the contemporary world with both his hands; formerly He protected it only with one hand. Today, however, in the midst of so many dangers which man lives in, God guards him like mother does to his baby when he begins to walk. Christ helps us today more than once, as well as Theothokos and the Saints, but we do not understand it (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Nuțescu 2003a: 33).

After all these trials and struggles, victory will be on the part of God and faith, of Christ and the Church. The world that will arise after these confrontations will be one of moral good together with Christ and within the Church, for, according to the Elder, “whether men wish or not, a time will come when all will believe, because they will come to a clog and Christ will intervene” (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Lacoschitiotul 2000: 280).

Knowing these present facts and the events that will follow, we must be more attached to faith and the Church and be more concerned with an elevated moral life, which is a true “martyrdom” (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Nuțescu 2003a: 81) that God will reward at the end of the ages.

All this continuous withdrawal from God brings anxiety and dissatisfaction to man because the true, pure and high joy is the spiritual one which is not subject to danger of ephemeral and loss. “Man rests and finds physical and soul rest” (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Manolache 2009: 15) only near Christ. Along with Him, all trials and

tribulations turn into “honey” (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Manolache 2009: 31), because “only Christ is the One who does not deceive man” (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Manolache 2009: 173) and true joy can be found only besides Him.

In order to have this, people need to return to their spiritual simplicity and purity, to simplify their lives in relation to all material things or to the many “conveniences” (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Manolache 2009: 19) and thus being unified to entrust it to God.

Unfortunately, man scarcely or even never achieves this spiritual consciousness and profound knowledge of the present world meaning, as battlefield for the acquisition of the Kingdom of Heaven. And so the troubled spirit of our day finds it difficult to really know itself and to understand the vocation and the high sense of existence, and to work accordingly for the personal and world salvation.

God could awaken him forcefully to this inward knowledge, but He does not do it out of respect for the freedom He endowed man with. “God”, says Saint Paisios,

can make all the people of the world repent in a second if he presses «the button» and lets an earthquake happen on the whole earth. Immediately everyone would cry: “I have sinned! I have sinned!” and would have read Paraklisis and would have brought offerings. But after a week, everyone would run again to party (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Manolache 2009: 23).

However God does not interfere with human freedom, but He gives man signs and clues about his life. When man does good deeds, He rewards him with a multitude of gifts or charisma. But when man perseveres in sin, He tries to bring him back to the path of salvation through suffering and repentance, because “there is no greater pain for God than to see man in hell” (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Lacoschitiotul 2000: 106). Thus, “the way to God is the everyday cross. No one has ascended to Heaven living in comfort” (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Manolache 2009: 86).

Regardless of his sins or transgressions, when man gets to know his own sins and decides to free from them, God helps and strengthens him in this spiritual struggle. And those who overcome them by grace and personal effort are crowned by God with His endless joy in the Kingdom of His eternal love.

**Trials coming from people – signs of “spiritual parasites” and true self-knowledge**

Saint Paisios of Mount Athos believed that “where it is a lot of misfortune, there are many spiritual parasites” (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Manolache 2009: 149) and the way we face trouble shows our character. “Trials” – he said – “reveal us exactly how we are” (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Manolache 2009: 100), that is our quality or, on the contrary, our moral pettiness. Indeed, if success or the way we rejoice when we are successful reveals one side of our character, the way we face tribulations tells everything about us, about our moral concern or its absence, about our ideals and goals in life and about the honest or reprobate means we use to reach them.

St. Paisios considers the worldly spirit to be the greatest enemy of man. It often works through our fellow men who lack moral preoccupations and scrupulosity and who live in the bondage of passions that get multiplied in the world, including through their attitude towards any spiritual thing. Some of them live in “leisure”, “comforts” and “luxury”, and these make them slaves of the matter, and “possessed” but not possessors of things they restlessly struggle to gather and multiply. Their life is opaque, their souls are dark, and the Christian life seems to them nonsense and aimless torture. Because of this, they talk ironically and behave with hostility towards everything that is good deed and Christian virtue. The spiritual man seems an unnecessary existence and a meaningless presence to them. The attitude towards such a “heavenly man” and “earthly angel” varies from simple irony and “superiority” to persecution, oppression and martyrdom. St. Paisios considered that when we meet such hostile behaviour, we should have a high spiritual attitude and a spirit of martyrdom regardless of its intensity.

With his great spiritual discernment, the Holy Father identified four *stages in confronting injustice*. The first stage is: *to respond it accordingly*; the second: *to feel very agitated inside, but not to answer back or to react*; the third step: *to manage not to feel distempered and to remain untouched*; and the fourth stage: *to feel a lot of joy and happiness for the injustice that has been done to you* (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Manolache 2009: 76).

St. Paisios teaches us to consider such villains and evildoers as truly “benevolent” and to give them the honour they deserve: he

who consciously does us wrong is a benevolent to us. We must love him as our benefactor. We owe to the one who does us well both in this life and in the other life. While he who injures us, actually does us a favour and gathers treasures for us in the heavenly treasury (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Manolache 2009: 22).

If we have not acquired this angelic power to consider even the bad ones as some that once were good but fell from their true state and could return to it with our help, then at least let’s look at them with forgiveness and compassion, as to someone seriously ill of hate and malice. The conduct of the spiritual person should be full of prayer and forgiveness and not of judgment and condemnation or gossip and slander. If by judging them we become “anti-Christians” too, like the one who kidnapped or usurped the absolute right of God to be the knower of hearts and consequently the fair Judge, through forgiveness and prayer for their correction, we will be acceptors and labourers of the new commandment of love – Christ’s testament over centuries.

In other words, it is only through love and forgiveness we can help them discover and practice the “commandment of love” and not so much through words, but by our personal example.

### **Pain, suffering and disease – stairway to Heaven and gate to Eden**

Saint Paisios considered that trials and sufferings constitute a shorter, but harsher and painful way of testing our faith, a way of God’s revelation in our lives and of profound self-knowledge. Therefore he urged: “Do not flee from tribulation and trouble; for by this you can find God. We cannot enter the Kingdom of God without sufferings” (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Manolache 2009: 117).

The Spiritual Father considered them to be “a light slapping from the Good God” (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Manolache 2009: 32), which softens our hearts (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Manolache 2009: 32); it is “«the antibiotic» God gives us for the diseases and passions of our souls” (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Manolache 2009: 32) and also a “school where great virtues are easily acquired” (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Manolache 2009: 117), “a stairway to



Heaven” (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Manolache 2009: 99) and “a passport” to the Kingdom of Heaven (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Manolache 2009: 32), because “in order to get to the sweet Heaven, man must eat many bitter things here and must hold the record of trials in his hand” (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Manolache 2009: 99). At the same time through tribulations we become imitators of Christ and co-suffering, because in order to gain salvation it is absolutely necessary “to ascend on the Golgotha of the Lord, walking on His bloody footsteps” (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Manolache 2009: 116). The old Athonite advised as well: “If you want to win the Kingdom of Heaven, prefer the afflictions, for the one who does not suffer will not enter it because the gate is narrow” (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Manolache 2009: 117).

If we are not tempted, he thought, we will find ourselves outside and away from God and the way of the saints, while, by patience, we follow God and we are like those who well-pleased Him (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Manolache 2009: 147).

Man penetrates “the deepest meaning of life” (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Manolache 2009: 117) through all the unintentional trials and sufferings, but especially by bearing their cross, and if he endures them with hope, “he pays his sins, and gathers his heavenly reward” (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Manolache 2009: 117). Without these moral tests, “men would have become beasts, they would not have come close to God” (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Manolache 2009: 97) but would have become savage and would have lived outside the spiritual reality (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Manolache 2009: 97) and life.

Most often, when he is young and healthy, man is not concerned with his inner life, but he almost exclusively tries to find and taste the ephemeral pleasures of existence. However, suffering is an existential earthquake, and thus a way of “coming in”, of repentance and holiness. “When man feels perfectly healthy”, said the Athonite Saint,

it is not good. To suffer something is much better for him. Therefore, if someone has no obligations to fulfil, he should rather prefer disease than health. Health brings him loss, while he gains through illness when he faces it with patience (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Manolache 2009: 84).

Likewise,

the man who does not go through trials, who does not want to feel pain and distress, who does not want to be in difficulty, or to be reproof, but only wants to live well, is out of reality. “We went through fire and through water: but thou broughtest us out into a wealthy place”, the Psalmist said. You see that Mother of God also felt sorrow, and our saints too, and that is why we must suffer as well, since we follow the same path. And Christ came to earth through suffering, He descended from Heaven, and became flesh, He suffered tribulations, and was crucified. And now the Christian understands Christ’s coming only this way – through suffering (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Manolache 2009: 97).

Saint Paisios the Athonite considered that diseases “help a lot in the spiritual progress” (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Manolache 2009: 31) of man, especially to those who apparently are healthy and happy. This state of apparent joy in relation to the world and the body is loss for the soul, because when his health is good, he is not spiritually well (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Manolache 2009: 31). Thus, “the disease is a very great benefit! It cleanses man from sin, and sometimes it provides him with payment” (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Manolache 2009: 31) being a real blessing.

Saint Paisios of Mount Athos compares the soul of the Christian with gold, and the disease with the fire or the furnace where it is cleansed and purified (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Manolache 2009: 31). When it comes to lower sins, sorrows “cleanse and bleach man’s soul” (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Manolache 2009: 32). They have a purifying and sanctifying role and, as the Elder said: “they even exceed the prayer «Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me!»” (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Manolache 2009: 32). Suffering and physical diseases help the healing of sins and spiritual diseases, because “when the soul is tried, it is sanctified” (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Manolache 2009: 84). The Elder said that “disease, affliction and swearing are blessings for the man who understood the deepest meaning of life. The tribulations man has to pass through pay his sins and gather heavenly payment” (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Manolache 2009: 117). Therefore, “if we knew how much we would benefit from disease, we would not want to become healthy, but we would prefer to be sick and to bear in order to get a better place in Heaven” (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Manolache 2009: 31).

The involuntary trials are universal and useful to everybody. Sooner or later in this life every man will have to face more or less, and shorter or longer suffering. Thus they are universal and are a part of the divine oikonomia for the human race and each individual. And by this, they have a general benefit. However, the cleansing and sanctification of man's soul or on the contrary, the multiplication of pain and condemnation, for non-acceptance and rebellion depends on the way he understands them and, above all, behaves towards them.

Referring to the universality of involuntary sufferings, St. Paisios of Mount Athos said that God allows temptation to: *His friends*, that they may have boldness before Him; *the labourers*, for the growth of spiritual wealth; *the careless*, to save them from their fall; *those who are far away from Him*, in order to get them close to Him and to the purpose of their lives (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Manolache 2009: 147).

Their general causes are *the absence of faith and fear of God* (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Manolache 2009: 85), *the presence of sins* and *the absence of repentance*. And in connection with the present world and the contemporary man who is in an exaggerated search for pleasure and comfort, Saint Paisios observed that “man never feared sickness and death so much as now when he is not afraid of God” (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Manolache 2009: 85).

Thus God “allows illnesses and injustices for our mistakes made of ignorance” (Isaac, trans. Nuțescu 2005: 390). If man repented sincerely and corrected for good, he would not need them, but because of his weakness, recurrence and acquaintance with sins, the diseases are absolutely necessary and useful. And their variety and difficulty depends on his state of bondage to the sins and to the callousness of his soul.

If those who live in mild sins correct more easily through shorter trials which are easier to fight, the vicious ones need heavy suffering to dig up and soften their hardened souls; sometimes, not even sufferings are enough to do this and they leave this life in a sinful condition.

So beyond their gravity and pain, all trials and sufferings have a positive and cleansing role, being permitted by God. They are useful to the soul and through its repentance (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Manolache 2009: 147) and humility, they call God's grace, giving Him

the occasion to reward us, since “by small tribulations we pay the eternal debts” (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Manolache 2009: 98).

In the same direction, Saint Paisios considered that infirmity is God’s blessing (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Manolache 2009: 81) and “for all who were born crippled or became so because of them or others, if they do not complain, but glorify God with humility and live near Christ, He will set them in Heaven at the same place with the confessors” (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Manolache 2009: 32).

Like the saints of the Church who encompassed everyone in their love and heart, Elder Paisios loved the orphans and valued them in a very special way and he said God helps them a lot in this life and will give them a great reward beyond. This will happen if they bear with “magnanimity” of soul or spiritual nobility the cross of life they received without having the power to influence the evolution of things in their favour and in order to relieve it [The Holy Father said about orphans: “Blessed and thrice blessed are the orphans who have been deprived of their parents’ great affection, for they managed to have God as their Father already from this life. At the same time, they have the affection they were deprived of from their parents in God’s savings bank «with interest»”] (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Nuțescu 2005: 226).

Referring to the multiplication of cancers and to the fact there were never so many sick people, St. Paisios thought that once man had a natural life and a healthy diet, based on clean and good foods. Today, despite the advances in medicine, stress, “fake food” (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Nuțescu 2003a: 119), soul unrest, and last but not least, Chernobyl and environmental contamination have led to the unprecedented multiplication of the most serious diseases, both physical and spiritual.

As to the sufferings of the world and of the contemporary man, the Holy Father noticed:

We live in such a crippled world! Can you think of a time when so many people were sick? It was not like that in the old days. Now all the letters I get in the mail are about cancer or mental disease or strokes or broken homes. This is what I hear every day. In the past, cancer was rare. You see, back then, people led a natural life. God of course allowed illness, but that’s another matter. People ate natural foods and were full of health. Fruits, onions, tomatoes and so on, they were all pure. Now even natural foods will make people sick, because everything around

us is contaminated. If things were this way back then, my eating habits would have killed me since being a monk, I ate only leeks, lettuce, onions and cabbage from my garden. And yet, I lived on that diet for years and I was so healthy. Now they use fertilizers and pesticides. Think of all the diseases brought on by food and stress. When science is used indiscriminately, thousands of lives are ruined” (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Nuțescu 2003a: 118-119).

He said to a disciple who had two operations: “Do not talk at all! Do not say that to any priest. You took two francs from God, while others took nothing” (Zurnazoglu, trans. Nuțescu 2006: 281).

Therefore, sufferings, pains and diseases are part of God’s plan to save the human race fallen into sin. They occur through God’s all-wise indulgence and are the result of our personal sins, being proportionate to them. But, at the same time, they are paths to repentance and straightening through humble thought and patience, and thus they are an opportunity for cleansing, sanctification and eternal reward.

### **“The joys of suffering” (Bejan 1995) or facing the illness in a spiritual way**

We have already seen that Saint Paisios of the Holy Mountain believed that a man who does not suffer trials and does not accept their purpose and benefit is “out of reality” (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Manolache 2009: 97) and lives away from God and from the authentic spiritual life. Such a man has a purely worldly attitude. He is saddened for the evil sorrow associated with the loss of pleasure and material goods, and when it comes to diseases, he is sad for the loss of physical health. Far from alleviating his suffering, his attitude of refusal, rejection, rebellion, non-acceptance and misunderstanding of their profound and saving meanings multiplies, deepens and accentuates his pain.

Our Orthodox Faith recommends to the person on the sick bed to do the “philosophy of illness”, that is to talk to himself and about himself, to make an x-ray of his spiritual life and an evaluation of his “inner settlement”. This is necessary to ascertain how close or far he is from God, the Source of his life, as well as from the vocation or the essential meaning of life – gaining salvation. This will help him to realize the seriousness of his fall when it exists and to decipher the real causes of his illness and at the same time to develop a strategy of confrontation and struggle against it. The fewer and smaller the sins committed are and the

quicker and more profound the repentance is, the lighter and more transient the diseases or the sufferings will be. However, if man resists to accept and confront them, blaming the others or comparing him with the others seemingly more sinful than himself, and apparently less tried, he alone is the one who multiplies and intensifies his pain. St. Isaac of Syria said: “All the hardships and tribulations that are not borne carry a double torment. For patience decreases their pressure” (Sfântul Isaac Sirul, trans. Stăniloae 1981: 247-248); and the unaccepted pain doubles the pressure, even by simply meditating on it.

Similarly, Elder Paisios considers: when man understands his illness spiritually and its redemptive purpose, “he will calm down and comfort himself divinely” (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Manolache 2009: 84). The disease itself becomes his source of joy and a “guardian” of this feeling, because he “will be placed together with confessors and martyrs” (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Manolache 2009: 85). “If you think of suffering, it will double, while by having a good thought, for example if you remember those who suffer more than you, or if you sing psalms a little, the pain is forgotten” (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Manolache 2009: 84), he said.

When the intensity of suffering affects us exclusively and consumes all our physical and spiritual powers, together with the medicine of repentance, humility, patience and prayer, thinking about the saints and martyrs’ suffering from the ancient times is of great benefit and brings great power of comfort and relief, because unlike us, they were cruelly tortured and scorned for the only guilt of believing in God. Along with these, we must think about the thousands and millions of people in trouble and trials infinitely heavier and more numerous than ours, and this must give us strength and courage to face them and increase our solidarity in suffering. Along with these thoughts, we must strengthen ourselves in the hope that, through patience and repentance, we will rejoice with them of the reward from the future, everlasting and happy life.

Therefore, the spiritual understanding of the disease is of great benefit to the sufferer, for when “men face trials in a worldly way, they will suffer. They must leave their fate in God’s hand otherwise everything is a torment for them” (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Manolache 2009: 98).

Such a profound understanding of the illness significance will bring the “joyful grief” (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Nuțescu 2003b: 179) and the “joyful sorrow” (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Nuțescu 2003b: 179) to the sick, that is both pain and joy (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Nuțescu 2003b: 179). Saint Paisios rightly considered that “the true joy is born from suffering. When we feel the spiritual joy, we do not want the material one that fills us with ballast and brings anxiety” (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Manolache 2009: 173).

If we understand and accept “the sad and painful things” (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Manolache 2009: 169), our tears will erase the sins (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Manolache 2009: 91) and will reborn us to the true life through repentance. They will no longer be painful and bitter, but smooth and sweet, such as the comfort and joy that God will overflow upon the tried soul.

The discovery of this profound meaning of the trials supposes to have the right attitude towards them and to say: “Now God wants me like this and a few years ago he wanted me differently!” (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Manolache 2009: 85), that is, then – healthy, and now – in distress, however both states serving for our salvation.

This self-inquiry of the patient is absolutely necessary and “the most useful of all inquiries” (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Nuțescu 2003b: 148). Through it, and in order to decipher the causes of his sufferings, and his attitude towards it,

man must check his thoughts and actions, to see if they are in accordance with the Gospel's commandments, to surprise his faults and to labour in order to correct them. For if he lets a mistake unnoticed, or when someone shows him some infirmity he has and he does not want to think about it, he cannot grow spiritually (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Nuțescu 2003b: 148).

Such introspection and self-knowledge make man discover the previous “wrong conscience” (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Nuțescu 2003b: 140) which was at the root of his sins, and correct it by repentance and humility. For man the true “baptism of tears” and the

true repentance is: first to feel his error, to be hurt by it, to ask for forgiveness from God, and then to confess. In this way the divine comfort will come. That's why I always recommend repentance and confession. I have never recommended only confession (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Nuțescu 2003b: 121).

It leads to the experience of confession and gives back tranquillity and clarity to the soul.

If before his mind was darkened by his sins, and he saw it as through mist and fog (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Manolache 2009: 36), by having an honest and clean confession, “the mist flees and the horizon appears clearly” (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Manolache 2009: 36). Thus on the one hand, man feels the abomination of the sins which led him to physical and soul sickness, and on the other hand his release from them, through the grace of God manifested through his spiritual father. By confessing, man throws “the debris from within” (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Nuțescu 2003b: 261), “opening his heart to the spiritual father and telling him the mistakes; he also humbles himself, and opens the door of Heaven, permitting God's grace to descend abundantly upon him and to free him” (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Nuțescu 2003b: 261).

Just like the saints of the ancient *Paterikon*, St. Paisios considered repentance a true medicine (Isaac, trans. Nuțescu 2005: 389) and he thought that the person who “feels his sinfulness and sighs from the depths of his soul is above the one who can raise up the dead, or who can be useful to the whole world with his teachings” (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Manolache 2009: 41).

In order that this cure of repentance makes its effect efficiently and totally, it is necessary the patient be cared by an accomplished confessor, whom the old Athonite considers to be “a real physician of the soul” (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Nuțescu 2003b: 270). With his waking conscience, the Holy Father insisted:

the most urgent thing for people is to find a confessor, to confess, to have confidence in him, and to consult with him. If they have a confessor and make a prayer program, and a little study, if they go to church and partake Eucharist, then they have nothing to fear in this life (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Nuțescu 2003b: 269).

The profound purpose of man's existence is to be saved, “to ascend spiritually, and not just not to sin” (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Nuțescu 2003a: 46) and if he does not repent, he will lose his eternal life. But he must be helped to understand and feel this, especially since the sins darken his soul and conscience, they alter his discernment, and



weaken the feeling of personal sinfulness until suppression. The habit of sin, his bondage to it, and the passion of the soul diminish the conscience that he has wronged and he gets to consider sin to be fashionable, popular with the “emancipated” and “disinhibited” times from today and a natural and normal thing. In order to awaken from this drunkenness and darkness, he needs the help of a spiritual father to rebirth him to the real spiritual life. Saint Paisios said:

God wants man to be helped by man and to correct himself through man. That is Good Lord’s oikonomia, that man should humble himself. Everyone should tell the confessor all his thoughts and the situations he goes through in order to get advice from him. He should not decide by himself on difficult matters, nor should he face by himself the difficulties he encounters in his labour by making self-experiences, because the tempter will confuse him and cause him trouble (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Nuțescu 2003b: 268).

The Elder believed “the churches are emptied and, the psychiatric clinics are filled instead” (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Manolache 2009: 38) because the good spiritual fathers lack; they would become empty

if Christians confessed in a pure, honest and humble manner, being obedient to an experienced spiritual father who might be a bit harsh. Then nobody would have anguish, troubles, and great temptation. You must know that everything starts from selfishness, disobedience and evil thoughts. Obedience means life. Disobedience is death (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Manolache 2009: 45).

St. Paisios also made a comparison between the spiritual father and the psychologist, and he observed that

although many people have problems caused by their sins, they do not go to a confessor who can really help them but end up by confessing to psychologists. They tell their story, ask them for advices to their problems, and if they have to cross a river, they will throw themselves into the water and the result is they drown or go out, but where do they go out? While, if they go to confess to the confessor, they will pass on the other side of the bridge without labour, for God’s grace works in the Sacrament of Confession and they are freed (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Nuțescu 2003b: 265).

The struggle against sins is fruitless and in vain if we are not obedient to a skilful confessor.

The one who does not have a spiritual father to consult with him on his spiritual journey, will be darkened, and will get tired, will delay and will hardly get to his destination. If he gives solutions to his own problems, however wise he is, he will remain dark because he walks with confidence in himself and with pride. While if someone humbles and goes with confidence and zeal to the confessor and asks for his opinion, he will be helped. Because then God surely illuminates the spiritual father and gives him the correct answer. Behold, when someone comes with godliness, thinking that I am holy, though I am a tin plate, I noticed that I feel a change within myself, and what I say is not mine. I clearly realize from this the man came with godliness, and God gives me this good condition not to do injustice to him. In these cases, if it is a serious matter, God announces you and you can tell him what will happen, when will happen and how to face it” (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Nuțescu 2003b: 268).

Having an “inner contrition” (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Nuțescu 2003b: 166) and such a re-awakened and re-born conscience,

the spiritual life does not need years. Someone can move from hell to Heaven in a second if he repents. Man is changing. He can be an angel, but he can also be a devil. Oh my, what power repentance has! It absorbs the divine grace. It is enough for man to put a humble thought in his mind and he is saved. Or to put a thought of pride and he is gone and lost if he does not repent and death finds him in this state. Of course, the humble thought must also be accompanied by inner sigh and contrition (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Nuțescu 2003b: 175).

*Deep repentance* will help the person who is in pain to practice patience, with the hope of divine comfort and reward. If sin made him obdurate and a “beast”, the tribulations and trials had softened the shell of his sins and the tears washed and purified his soul. Thus patience is a bitter medicine, but its blessed fruits are sweet (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Manolache 2009: 169) and lead to humble thinking that brings grace.

Eulogizing its blessed fruits, St. Paisios said that “no one climbs to Heaven with a worldly climb, but with a spiritual descent” (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Lacoschiotul 2000: 79). Humility is “the foundation of all virtues” (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Nuțescu 2003a: 162), because “everything becomes nothing without humility. And nothing becomes everything through humility” (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Nuțescu 2003a: 162). But “you must become nothing so

that God may become everything in your life” (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Nuțescu 2003a: 114). Being God’s gift “true humility conceals not only the other virtues, but also itself” (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Nuțescu 2003a: 163), but it attracts the divine grace and leads the soul into the lands of rest.

Along with these spiritual “medicines”, *prayer* is a great necessity and benefit for the sick person, a dialogue and conversation with the Heavenly Father. St. Paisios believed prayer should consist of three parts: *one for us*, *one for the living*, and *one for the dead* (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Nuțescu 2013: 113). It must begin with a sincere doxology and with gratitude to God for the gifts He has given us, including suffering. It should continue with the confession of sins and a sincere contrition of the soul, having the feeling that we are the worst or the first of the sinners and only then include our demands (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Manolache 2009: 157). But even through these requests we should not ask God for material things or goods or to lift ourselves from suffering bed, but to fulfil His will for our salvation. If He thinks it is helpful to lift us from the bed of pain and which is the best time for it, He will do it even without us asking Him. However we must wait patiently and repentantly and accept His redemptive will.

The Athonite Saint also considered we should not propose solutions to God, because as a Good and Loving Father, He knows what is useful to us. We just have to entrust our problems to Him and say:

My God, the thought tells me it will help me, but You know better what is useful for my soul. “*Thy will be done!*”. Therefore, when we say with all our heart “*Thy will be done!*”, the will of God will be done, which will ultimately benefit our soul” (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Nuțescu 2013: 116).

Along with prayer, *fasting* is “the best doctor” (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Manolache 2009: 86), and singing or chanting is “the best painkiller” (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Manolache 2009: 85).

Also, the Athonite father taught that we must show a lot of love and compassion to those who are in distress, seeking to relieve their pain through word and deed. This kind of service and liturgy to our neighbour is pleasing to God. If he has no sins, though even if we live a moment, our mind is still inclined towards these, for his love, the one who cares for the very sick person is sanctified. If he has sins, they are wiped out no matter

how many and heavy they are, proportionate to his patience and kindness, shown to the suffering neighbour.

Strengthened by the divine grace and lined up by the spiritual remedies of repentance, humility, patience and prayer, the tried one lives the “joys of suffering” sprung from the hope of eternal reward. For “the burden of suffering we endure for Christ means nothing but the weight of the glory that awaits us” (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Manolache 2009: 117). In a phrase of exceptional spiritual charm St. Paisios observed that this peace and joy of the soul is due to the fact that “every time there are heavy times, virtue is a spiritual impermeable cover above us” (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Manolache 2009: 83).

Then Saint Paisios’ so dear words will prove to be right as they characterized his life and patience in suffering: “*Do what rests you spiritually, but just be with Christ*” (Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, trans. Nuțescu 2003c: 113).

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Saint Paisios of Mount Athos is one of the most important contemporary saints and, at the same time, one of the most beloved in all Eastern faith and spirituality. He earned this with his love and humbleness, and with his words and counsel given “with great power” and able to convert the souls which are full of passions and stubborn, as he did during his life and work, as well as after his moving to the eternal ones.

As one who lived in a time so close to us, moving to the eternal life in 1994, but especially who carried in his body the cross of trials and passions, he is a sublime model for any soul tried by sickness and suffering. He is our model by assuming and bearing trouble with patience and hope in reward from the same Heavenly Good and Loving Father.

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