

Faithful and Devoted Physicians – Heavenly People / Earthly Angels

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Abstract:

In ancient and more recent writings of Orthodox Spirituality, there is an emphasis on the greatness of the faithful unmercenary physician before God, the welcome physician with love for man. Our Good God works through the physician to heal the sick most of the time. In my paper, I wish to emphasize, starting from the writings of the Fathers of the Church, the fact that the holy unmercenary doctors are healers in the name of Christ and His missionaries, then I intend to underline that great before God is the faithful unmercenary physician with love for people and to reveal, with emotion, some of the concerns of a good devoted physician, a missionary of Christ, afterwards, I will make known the prayer of a physician for his patients and, finally, I will argue that an appropriate assessment of the relationship between disease and sin has important consequences on the value framework that concerns medicine.

Keywords: faithful; physicians; God; Fathers of the Church; heavenly people; earthly angels

1. Holy Unmercenary Doctors – Healers in the Name of Christ and His Missionaries

The Church called those saints who pleased God and performed miracles, namely Cosmas and Damian of Arabia, Cosmas and Damian of Asia Minor, Cyrus and John, Thalelaeus, Cosmas and Damian of Rome, Ermolai, Panteleimon, Anikita and Photius, Dyodim, Luke the surgeon, archbishop of Crimea, etc., “wonderworking unmercenary physicians.”

In their lives of wonders, healing and passions, there are accounts in the synaxaries which read that, following the Gospel, some of these great saints wandered through towns and villages preaching Christ and healing the sick. Out of strong love for God and their neighbours, they never received payment for their services, obeying the command of Christ the

Saviour who said: “Freely you have received, freely give” (Mt. 10, 8). As a result of these wonderful deeds, they were called “wonderworking unmercenary physicians”. Since healing was given not by the medicine prescribed, but by their urgent prayers to God, their only payment was for the cured to embrace the true faith in Christ the Lord. For their deep faith, deep humbleness and the way in which they understood, witnessed and acted on evangelical teaching, God gave them the gift of performing miracles. Those that encountered God’s saints converted to Christianity, receiving the healing of both body and soul.

During treatment, some of these healing saints welcomed those suffering from various illnesses into their homes with great love and those who were bedridden were carried on their shoulders seeking to heal their helplessness and pain.

Along with treatment and medical attention, the wonderworking unmercenary physicians recommended the sick to engage in prayer and penitence. In addition to medical consultations, healing and banishment of evil spirits, they mainly spread Christ’s teaching and continuously watched for all converted Christians to take the *right path* according to the word of the Gospel and not apostatize from it. This mission ultimately brought them a martyr’s death.

The Lives of the Saints tell us that when healings occurred, they addressed the sick: “We do not simply lay hands on you as we cannot do anything with our power. The strength of Christ Almighty, the One true God manifests itself in us and if you undoubtingly believe in Him, you will instantly be healed.”

2. Great before God is the faithful unmercenary physician with love for people

Among its salvific teachings that the Holy Scripture shares with us to learn and on which to act, it makes reference to the respect we owe to physicians. Thus, The Book of the All-Virtuous Wisdom of Yeshua ben Sira (38, 1) reads as follows: “Honour the doctor as he deserves, he is also a creature of God;” “Give the doctor room, he was made by God, as well, do not let him depart from you because you will need him. There is time for his hands to smell of a good odour” (Yeshua ben Sira 38, 12f). It is a great, noble and holy mission of paramount importance to be a doctor, to

help in maintaining and improving life, to bring comfort and take away suffering. Saint Basil the Great, one of the Church's pillars of faith calls medicine, "an art" given to us by God for our help as it heals the sick as much as it can:

Every art was given to us by God as help for our weak nature. For instance: agriculture was given because what grows from the earth does not suffice to satisfy our needs; then there was the art of weaving since wearing clothes is necessary, sensible and defends us against the cold and rain; this also holds true for architecture (wall painting) and medical art. Due to the fact that our body, because of its weakness, is susceptible to various detrimental influences both from without and within, it suffers because of over-abundance or insufficiency; therefore, medical art was given to us by God, the Guide of our entire life, as a gift for the healing of the soul to eliminate what is unnecessary and to add what is necessary. Similarly, if we had remained in the paradise of relish, we would not need the invention of agriculture and the work it demands, not to mention medical help to deal with pain since we did not remain free of pain, as it was intended for us after our creation, before the fall (Basil the Great 1989, 296-297).

The tremendous responsibility, the hardship of the mission and the honour and respect enjoyed by the ones that answered God's calling to embrace this art, were called on briefly by the same Holy Father:

All those that choose medicine, you know that your calling means caring for man. And it seems to me that the one who puts science before all other endeavours that engage man, has found a proper judgement and has not gone astray from what is essential; in exchange, it is equally relevant that the most precious of all gifts is life, you want to run away from it as if it were something painful when you cannot restore someone's health (Basil the Great 1988, 183).

In ancient and more recent writings of Orthodox Spirituality, there is emphasis on the greatness of the faithful unmercenary physician before God, the welcome physician with love for man. Thus, to the great Egyptian father and hermit, Anthony the Great (†356), the following was revealed by God in the desert: "In the city, there is someone like you, a physician that shares his knowledge with the needy and who sings the Trisagion every day (the chant 'Holy God, Holy Mighty, Holy Immortal, have mercy on us') together with the angels." (*Patericul sau Apoftegmele Părinților...* 2007, 49) This may be the source of inspiration for these syntagms used by our believers to describe our good, competent, faithful and loving physicians, animated by their calling and who know how to listen to their patients' troubles, to understand them, to explain to them

clearly the state of their illness and the possibilities of healing; they are *angels in a white coat* and *messengers of life* whose hands are kissed with no shyness as through these hands God performed the healing.

3. Concerns of a good devoted physician, a missionary of Christ

In the volume *Patericon of the 20th Century* (Ioannidis s.a., 64-65) we are told, among other things, about the concerns of a physician dwelling in faith and Christian love; as a very good specialist, devoted and skilled physician, he wanted to become a proper missionary of Christian faith for his students. Thus, this physician referred to, Gheorgos Papazahos, was also a professor at the Faculty of Medicine, University of Athens, Greece. In a dialogue with his interlocutor, Klitos Ioannidis, he brings to his attention his talks with his confessor – Father Porphyrios Bairaktaris (†1991) – a confessor in Greece, equally known as a great visionary, bearing the gifts of the Holy Spirit. The dialogue went on as follows:

– At the university I teach cardiography as an optional discipline. Since cardiography is of particular interest due to the fact that it is being practiced by all cardiologists, all students want to follow this course. Therefore, most times the amphitheatre is full of students. Sometimes I tell them jokes, anecdotes and we laugh, I love them, they love me and, in short, we have a cordial relationship.

Thus, many times an idea came to my mind and I finally confessed it to Father Porphyrios as a dilemma of mine:

– Father, I speak to these children about cardiography for hours. They take everything I say for granted. And if I love them, so do they love me. Apart from cardiography which we are going to use for a couple of years ... – twenty, thirty, forty, let's say fifty years of medicine – couldn't I talk to them about something spiritual that lasts for an eternity? I should tell them to love Christ, to go to confession, to take the Eucharist and to go to church... Certainly, the university pays me to teach cardiography, not to preach. And after all, maybe some of my students do not want me to speak to them about such things, or perhaps they do not even believe in God. Why should I not tell them, at times, when I have finished cardiography lessons, that students acclaim and so do I, to take a step toward Christ, as well...

Listen to what Father Porphyrios told me:

– And where is the dilemma? When you go to teach, have you taken the Eucharist?

– Yes, father, I have.

- Do you take the Eucharist on Sunday?
 - I do with your blessing, your holiness.
 - Then Christ Himself enters the amphitheatre. What do you need words for when you have Christ in you when you speak at your desk? Let them be. Tell them nothing. [1]
- Klitos Ioannidis: This is how a truly deified man approaches things, he witnesses the presence of Christ...
- Physician Gheorgos Papazahos: And through his words, he practically drove me to always go to my lectures after I had taken the Eucharist.

Undoubtedly, this physician was psychically always ready to receive the Holy Communion he indulged in with the blessing and benediction of his confessor, a charismatic father. By bringing this topic into play, we underline that the more or less often one receives the Holy Eucharist is not an intricate issue; St. John Chrysostom and other Fathers' reply would sound as follows, if we were to summarize it: Do you often prepare as required by the Church for receiving the Holy Eucharist? Then, get the Eucharist often. Do you seldom prepare for it? Get the Eucharist more seldom. Consequently, in other words, the Saints recommend the receiving of the Holy Eucharist after complete preparation in advance.

4. The Prayer of a physician for his patients

Our Good God works through the physician to heal the sick most of the time. Yeshua ben Sira the wise writes in his book on wisdom: "he (the doctor), too, will pray to God for rest and health in life" (38, 14).

The duty of a good physician is not limited to a precise diagnostic and prognostic with the help of the most accurate methods and means; on the contrary, his purpose is to understand, listen and establish a relationship of trust with the patient and his family or those close to him.

The faithful physician acknowledges his limits and, without falling prey to pride and self-sufficiency, he finds help beyond his powers. Thus, Christ gives wisdom and skilfulness to the physician, enlightening his mind to discover the disease and to apply treatment. The faithful, prayerful physician who loves the suffering and helps them, approaching them with love and kindness, makes Christ dwell in him so as to heal and bring comfort to the sick. The faithful, devoted physician solemnly engages to consecrate his entire life to the service of humankind and to

exert this art conscientiously and with dignity, considering the patient's health to be his ultimate aim.

When complete treatment is applied to man who is bipolar (body and soul), action on the two should be considered. Usually Christian physicians take this fact into account as they are called to serve man in his integrity of person with body and soul and not only a sick body or simply *a case* or a disease. Therefore, for the well-being of the sick and his celeritous healing, he will be guided to follow a treatment for the soul as well. We encountered physicians who confessed that, when treating patients, they applied a complex treatment including medicine and psychotherapy, they recommended the riding of a bike, confession, religious services, the anointment of the sick, they prayed to God to enlighten them to find the optimal solutions to save and cure those suffering, they noticed the positive effect of prayer and of the sacrament pertaining to the anointment of the sick.

The same physician and professor at the Faculty of Medicine from Athens that we quoted in the subchapter above, Gheorgos Papazahos, unsurpassed seeker of heavenly treasures who devoted his entire activity to those in suffering, continuously concerned by the healing of the patients entrusted to him, inquired of a father, at a certain moment during a pilgrimage on the Holy Mt. Athos:

– Father, I know that the prayer of the heart is true science. However, I would like to ask you something even though it may seem as naive. Please forgive me.

– Yes. Ask me whatever you want.

– It is a blessing to have some rosaries (also white, to pass unnoticed) in the pocket of the white coat from work, and when I visit the patients with the other doctors for the daily hospital round, without the other doctors' knowledge, I say for a couple of times "O Lord, Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, Thy sinful servant... ." Is Christ's servant the next patient that waits for his consultation? Is it a blessing or a parody of the prayer of the heart which, in fact, passes through certain stages after appropriate preparation and lasts for a couple of hours?

Then, the father quickly rose from his chair, looked at me insistently and shouted:

– What are you saying? It is God's blessing. Do it from now on, as well. And pray a lot in the evening. Half of your beaded rosary is worth more than six hours of our prayers. But make it a beaded rosary of one hundred stones, not a small one.

Father explained to us that the prayer of the heart is complete because of its two parts. The former represents calling God's name, "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God" that is a doxology through which Christ is acknowledged as Lord and Son of

God. The latter is the prayer itself: “have mercy on me, a sinner”. This latter part should be uttered differently from the former which needs to be said slowly, in a doxological style; the latter part should sound like crying. The words “have mercy on me, a sinner” need to be spoken with intensity, imploring God to send His tears on us. If teardrops fall from our eyes, it is a sign that we are sought by the holy grace. Then we succeed in communicating with God, even if we do not hold our rosary in our hands (Ioannidis s.a., 191).

Aware of the effects of prayer, Father Porphyrios Bairaktaris whose ironies were also mentioned in the previous chapter, launched the following exhortation to a physician:

The moment you consult, you pray deeply, saying: “O Lord, Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, Thy sinful servant...;” thus, you will pray for every soul that God sent to you. Devote yourself to strong inner prayer, and God’s grace will reach the soul of the sick. All these are mysteries, others would not understand anything of them, give to the sick medicine as your science dictates you and he will finally be healed by Christ. Taking in your arms a little child or holding the hand of an older one, God’s grace touches them through your intense strong prayer aiming at Christ. This also holds true for any priest during all sacraments (*cf.* Todea-Gross 2003: 115).

Many studies were conducted on the healing power of prayer achieved in faith, humbleness and *with the whole heart*, hence its exceptional effects on the entire organism. As recent scientific research confirms, if the physician were to pray for God to illuminate him to choose the best medicine or to perform surgery in the wisest and most responsible way possible, where needed, and to help and heal the sick, and the latter, in his turn, prayed fervently for himself and his healing, chances of healing would much increase.

5. When health is not good... and on medicine as a purpose in itself

With respect to the patristic teaching that the Orthodox theologian Jean-Claude Larchet concisely dealt with in his book, *Theology of Illness*, in which he shed light on the patristic approach to medicine, as promoted by Corinna Delkeskamp-Hayes (2006) in one of her studies, we can argue that an appropriate assessment of the relationship between disease and sin has important consequences on the value framework that concerns medicine. What is considered evil in secular terms, namely illness and suffering, could be good at spiritual level where matters of life and death

are ultimately decided. In this sense, the great churchly writer, Origen, mentions the following:

Sometimes thoughtless healing does not prove beneficial to those treated after they have been through hardship for their own faults and have been freed too easily; in this case, they would have too easily taken for granted the healing of evil and since they did not take precautions in case of new illness, they fell prey to the same misfortunes. This is why, in similar cases, God the eternal, Who knows the hidden things and “knows everything before it happens” (History of Susanna 42), postpones, in His kindness, the more rapid help given to people; better said, His help consists of non-help for their own good (Origen 1982, 205).

Thus, undermining the wounds of sin as too superficial and easy to heal, one should beware not to fall prey again.

On the other hand, perfect health considers that good, from a secular perspective, may be compatible with the death of the soul and perhaps, it could also stand for a state of effective oblivion on God’s part to the extent to which there is lack of key stimulus for self-examination and reorientation. Our aim here is no easy task in our era in which the medical system is a well developed one from a technological viewpoint, treating diseases as phenomena in themselves, isolated from the one suffering from them. The patient may run the risk of being turned into a passive object of therapeutic intervention. He is expected to have full confidence in the expertise that guides these interventions. Even people’s natural fear of death the memory of which becomes acute through the experience of disease is absorbed by the hopes springing from medical developments. There is the risk for man not to have any use of his healed body for his soul, considering that the healing was not achieved through God, but with faith in medicine only and in the laws of nature with their exclusive guidance. Larchet claims that this state of things raises difficulties for patients as well: to assume their disease and to treat it in a useful manner, that is purifying for the soul, on the one hand and to make the sick believe that his state and destiny are totally in the hands of the physicians, that there is no medical solution for his various difficulties and no other way to go though the illness and suffering than to expect healing and easement from medicine, on the other hand. The dominant values of western civilisation favour such an attitude.

The crucial problem, tackled in an entire volume of the review *Christian Bioethics* (2006) that we have already mentioned, thus refers to

the way in which Christians, located in a fallen cosmos and burdened with a distorted nature, yet summoned to the restored intimacy of God's love, should confront their sinful state when faced with disease, suffering and the experience of human finiteness.

For this problem, patristic sources that Larchet compiled offer us an orientative framework, supported by (1) an ontological deviation of the disease, suffering and mortality which resulted from the disobedience of Adam, on the one hand and (2) the historical and teleological implications of redemption for the healing spiritual impact of experiential suffering, disease and facing human mortality, on the other hand. Therefore, because Christians bravely hold on through their recovery, they should work on developing their capacity to be thankful for their diseases.

A particularly Christian approach to medicine should rise against the "scientific" predilection of secular medicine toward materialism. For the diagnostic and therapeutic engagement of medicine not to obdurate the real nature of human corruptibility, "death" of the soul as the main factor that causes disease and mortality to the good creation of God should be taken into account. A Christian perspective imposes on medicine the need to face the reality of sin struggling with mortality and morbidity. However, it should face that reality in an all-embracing human solidarity.

A Christian approach to medicine should acknowledge the role of medicine necessary for supporting what lies "beyond" patients' medical problems. Medicine needs to agree on the fact that affection and threatening death are relevant for the patient's spiritual situation. First of all, he needs to leave patients time to meditate on the cause of their disease, not only from the perspective of the spiritual condition of fallen humankind, in general, but also from the perspective of its value of diagnostic for their personal responsibility in aggravating that condition within themselves.

Secondly, such a medicine should help the patients to experience recovery from disease as emblematic for their spiritual restoration. The person's encounter with the disease serves not only as an opportunity for reflection and penitence, but also to reorient the priorities of the patient in life. Similarly, the success of a medical therapy should point out to the sick that, beyond technological developments, success was supported by

divine mercy, thus encouraging the patient to renew his efforts toward a life in Christ, in cooperation with his supreme spiritual recovery, once his health is restored. Although nothing of these can be imposed on the patient from the outside and despite the fact that such an attempt of imposing would violate respect for human freedom that God Himself sustains, the medical personnel's awareness of such double divine-human "accounting" that governs healing efforts could implicitly encourage patients to gain access to this dimension.

New medical, biological and genetic techniques develop in the sense of increasing depersonalisation since they turn diseases and people's suffering into independent entities and purely technical problems; moreover, as already mentioned, they sometimes reduce man to an object of experience, taking less into account the person's easement than the progress of science and technology, considered a purpose in itself or even the search of the spectacular allied with advertising purposes, in certain cases. These new medical techniques tend to render life and death itself merely technical products, with economical views on personal relationships and fundamental human values that man desperately needs from his conception to death.

From a Christian perspective, the fight of medicine with people's diseases is justified. Medicine fights against the forces of evil and aims at implementing healing. Its success in healing symbolizes redemption. Unlike health, which is only good to the extent it affords Christians to fulfil God's commandments, making them better, medicine's remedies are given by God to ease human suffering and avoid premature death. However, if we leave aside its divine origin, put differently – as in the healings that our Lord Christ performed – if patients are not accustomed to respond to recovery by praising God and terminating sin, then medicine becomes no more than an idol. It diverts attention of the ones blessed with divine correction away from the purpose of that correction itself. An excessive concern with the preservation and restoration of the body's health constitutes such idolatry. In a Christian context, medicine – as disease – is a material means with a spiritual purpose. Once these means become purposes in themselves, either good – in one case – or evil – in the other, they can stand against their purpose, leaving the patient in a worse state than before. Unlike the disease, which only represents an evil

in the physical (hence relative) sense, medicine, when practiced solely as purpose in itself becomes an absolute evil and an expression of the state of sin itself whose results need eliminating.

Consequently, both Larchet in the *Introduction* to the book mentioned above and the author of this paper herein, aim at bringing into play perspectives that can help contemporary man to understand disease and the various forms of suffering pertaining to it, not to mention the therapies, healing and health itself in a wider framework than the one generally provided by our civilisation dominated by technical and material values and to allow him to better assume them. First of all, Christians need help in positioning these important experiences within their relationship with God, a framework in which, as in all human realities, they need to find or regain their place.

Notes:

¹ Both silence and waiting are meaningful.

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