

# Pastoral Reflections: The Revelation of the Meaning of Suffering and the Preparation for Eternal life

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## Abstract:

*The pastoral care for the elderly is one aspect of the missionary activity in which the priest is not allowed to have hesitations. His presence is eagerly awaited for, his intervention that springs from love must be comforting and hope giving. Together with the elderly, he must decipher the mystery of suffering, bring Christ into the soul of the lonely, develop the awareness of the ephemeral, a state of continual awakening and expectation of the heavenly Groom. Reconciliation with one's self, with people and with God, through confession and communion, strengthening communion, increasing love and peace are part of man's spiritual preparation to experience a different kind of knowledge of the world and of himself, but especially of God. Even if the priest cannot always heal, he can, in any circumstance, take care of and envelop each of his fellows in the garment of love and forgiveness.*

*In this context, we intended to draw attention to some particularities of the pastoral care for the elderly, an activity that always places us in the position of providing direct, uplifting, enlightening and reassuring answers to fundamental questions of the spiritual life.*

*In the first part of this research paper, we shall formulate some general considerations regarding the pastoral care for the elderly, while in the second part we shall discuss two important aspects of their pastoral care: the revelation of the meaning of suffering and the preparation for eternal life, both ways of responding to the emotional burden and to the spiritual turmoil of many elderly people. This emotional burden of old age and the spiritual uncertainties that the prospect of illness, suffering and end of the life generate often escape the attention and, implicitly, the pastoral care of the priest while also making the elderly difficult to be understood by those close to him. On the other hand, the emotional support and peace of mind provided by the discovery of the meaning of life and death, of the liberating suffering and the hope of meeting God and communion with the righteous, are invaluable gifts that the priest can offer to the elderly.*

**Keywords:** *care, the elderly, pastoral, suffering, eternal life, emotional support, peace of mind*

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The topic we propose for analysis in the homage year of the Pastoral Care for parents and children is of interest in the current context, having multiple practical consequences. We chose to approach a topic of practical theology due to the direct experience we have gained in the five years of managing a social establishment of the Church, that is a residential center for the elderly. We wanted to draw attention to some peculiarities of the pastoral care for the elderly, an activity that always places us in the position of providing direct, uplifting, enlightening and reassuring answers to fundamental questions of the spiritual life.

In the first part, we shall formulate some general considerations regarding the pastoral care for the elderly while in the second part, we shall discuss two important aspects of pastoral care: the revelation of the meaning of suffering and preparation for eternal life, both as forms of response to the emotional burden and spiritual turmoil of many older people. This emotional burden of the old age along with the spiritual uncertainties that the prospect of illness, suffering and end of the life generate often escape the attention and implicit pastoral care of the priest, making the elderly difficult to understand by those close to him. On the other hand, the emotional support and peace of mind given by the discovery of the meaning of life and death, of liberating suffering and the hope of meeting God and communion with the righteous, are invaluable gifts that the priest can bring to the elderly.

### **The pastoral care for the elderly**

The pastoral care for the elderly is a subdivision of the pastoral activity, defined in itself as the most complex knowledge and the art of the arts. Anchored in the demands of the Christian mission aimed at integrating people into the kingdom of God, the pastoral care for the elderly challenges the priest to guide and accompany the faithful who have reached old age, biologically speaking, towards the end of earthly life and to prepare them for eternal life.

The experience of meeting God, of knowing and participating in a “mystical union” with Him is not an experience to be easily acquired and particularly to communicate (Tia 2003: 13), but the old age, when people feel that their position in society and in the created universe is uncertain, is a time of need for spiritual guidance, while the willingness to assume a

spiritual meaning of life, illness and suffering becomes a pastoral opportunity for the priest.

Even though the old age is a gift from God, the spiritual, social and emotional issues that older people face are complex. This issue concerns both aspects related to family life (the departure of the sons and daughters from parental home, the death of the spouse or siblings, the change of residence or moving to a nursing home), the universe of professional and social relations (retirement, the limitation of social relationships and responsibilities, economic difficulties), as well as those related to personal existence, from the exasperated desire to seem young to the diminution or loss of personal autonomy, loneliness, illness, suffering and death. In each of these situations, the guiding and comforting presence of the priest is equally necessary and important.

From the point of view of the health, the subjects of pastoral activity may be healthy or sick. While the healthy elderly, relieved from professional tasks and some family responsibilities, have a lot of free time, for the sick elderly, time is compressed, they do not have much. The priest is called to sanctify the time of both, both being challenged in the Pauline logic “to redeem time” (Ephesians 5: 16).

For the healthy, the immediate pastoral care aims at their insertion, their anchoring in the spiritual life of the parish community, at making them valuable and responsible in the administrative and social activities of the parish. The immediate goal is to increase the feeling of belonging to a communion of life and love, to maintain self-esteem, the feeling of usefulness, of rediscovery and strengthening the joy of serving God and the others. As for those who are suffering, the priest seeks to offer them the opportunity to use their time for the purpose of spiritual recovering and strengthening of faith. He mediates their spiritual understanding of the disease and the pain it causes, sublimates their fear of death and prepares them for the encounter with Christ and eternal life. At the same time, the priest is challenged to deal with the suffering elderly’s psycho-affective addiction, to teach them to let themselves be taken care of, to drive away loneliness and to overcome their inability to communicate.

The fundamental topic of the pastoral care for the elderly is the healing (From this perspective, George D. Metallinos considers the parish “spiritual hospital”. See this approach in Metallinos, trans. by Ică 2004: 23-

32) - perceived as integration into the spiritual life, an integration that also leads to the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit (Metallinos, trans. by Ică 2004: 29). The whole man needs to be healed, freed from sin, disease, deified and thus saved. This is achieved by “Christianizing” his spiritual and social life, by clothing the human being in God’s grace. Through pastoral activity, the faithful is called to walk along a path to the point where he is able to apply to himself Paul’s confession: “nevertheless I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me” (Galatians 2: 20) and “for to me to live *is* Christ, and to die *is* gain” (Philippians 1: 21).

### **The spiritual meanings of suffering**

One of the most accessible definitions describes suffering as that unwanted state of physical or moral pain, bordering despair, which changes or transforms both the life of the one who lives it and the life of those around the sufferer (Sonea 2017: 71). Suffering can be perceived on a spiritual level as failure to seek happiness, as condition for gaining happiness, as path of existential knowledge while, under the skillful guidance of the priest, it can be assumed as “searching the Lord” [“For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth” (Hebrews 12: 6)] and as a blessing (Sonea 2017: 73-81).

From a spiritual point of view, suffering raises questions about man’s relationship with God, influences mentality and attitude, throws into despair and offers hope, redefines the status and qualities of the human being. Suffering particularizes and possibly even dehumanizes. Being placed in the immediate vicinity of disease or even death, it changes the way life itself is perceived. The attitude towards suffering is determined by the values that the grieving person possesses and manifests, but especially by the dedication of those around him / her. It all depends on the landmarks of the spiritual life: they can endow suffering with a meaning, but they can also completely devoid it of any personal or transcendent logic. The discreet but essential role of the priest is in such a context all the more important as the suffering man is, on the one hand, more sensitive, on the other, more willing to have a dialogue with Heaven:

Suffering, although it remains an evil in itself and a trial, can always become a source of goodness. It becomes so if it is lived out of love and with love, in participation in the very suffering of Christ the Crucified”.

By assuming, suffering metamorphoses and, becoming the cross accepted by the sufferer, it can take man to heaven. Therefore, through the priest sent to the bed where the sufferer lies, the Church urges man to discover the spiritual meanings of trial, of illness, of loneliness and suffering, of life itself (Pârvu, Iloaie and Vasile Someșanul 2014: 145).

Suffering, which in Orthodox theology is a consequence of sin and the result of the misuse of freedom, receives a spiritual meaning by reference to the Cross of Christ; it can contribute to the inner cleansing of man tested by the Lord, it can be received as a true blessing and it can be a “means of spiritual renewal” (Sonea 2017: 72).

The suffering Christian leaves the state of self-sufficiency, stops gazing towards his own self and this facilitates his encounter with God. Therefore, “the believer sees pain as a gift from God and thanks Him. He sees it as a means of practising humility and love. This is how a “transformer” works inside him, converting the challenges of pain into opportunities for preparation for eternity (Sonea 2017: 80).

Another important aspect for the faithful whose suffering acquired a spiritual meaning is the fact that he does not suffer alone. The Holy Apostle Paul speaks about the consolation that God Himself shows towards Christians in trouble and suffering, asserting with conviction the fact that Christ is close to the person who endures trials and suffering, strengthening and comforting (2 Corinthians 1: 3-7).

### **Preparation for eternal life**

One of the most difficult to manage pastoral states is the fear of death. Surprisingly, in the book of Revelation, listing those who will be condemned to eternal hell, Apostle John places at the top of the list the ones who fear (Revelation 21: 8), while the Holy Apostle Paul states, in the Epistle to the Hebrews, that Christ came “to deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage” (Hebrews 2: 15) (Moș 2014: 571). In his turn, Father Dumitru Stăniloae emphasizes the fact that “the fear of death is the strongest affect, the greatest human weakness” (Stăniloae 1956: 281). The more spiritually inert people are, the more they fear physical death and the loss of the temporary and perishable things they have identified themselves with in life. This fear is so great that we constantly want to forget about death and try to hide from it. In this context,

the Church, in a liturgical interpretation, alleviates this fear by praying for “a Christian end to our lives, without pain, without confrontation and in peace”. On the other hand, it urges us to always keep in mind that earthly life is ephemeral. From this perspective, the pastoral care for the elderly in regard to the end of life is, in fact, a preparation for the great transition to eternal life (Bel 2008: 348).

An essential characteristic of the Christian is that he expects what God prepares as ultimate reality, His Kingdom, “the life to come”, in which the entire creation will be changed. He knows “here have we no continuing city, but we seek one to come” (Hebrews 13: 14), because “our conversation is in heaven; from whence also we look for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ: Who shall change our vile body, that it may be fashioned like unto His glorious body” (Philippians 3: 20-21) (Bel 2008: 352).

Life is now experienced as a continuous pilgrimage, marked by an inner struggle. It essentially becomes a struggle between corruption, sin and death, on the one hand, and completeness, holiness, and happy eternal life, on the other. This struggle and its final victory are “life in Christ”, which will be crowned in the future Kingdom of God (Bel 2008: 352-353).

There is a very rich, but also outstanding theology of sickness, suffering and death in Orthodoxy, through the hope and comfort it promotes. For a Christian, life is a gift from God-Love (1 John 4: 8), it comes from Him and leads to Him. Death is part of life. It is a moment in life, not the final stage. It is not an end, that is, a stopping point, a wall beyond which there is nothing left, but a gate that separates the earth from heaven, the earthly life here and the heavenly life. God created us for abundant life, for eternal life (John 10: 10) and eternal life in communion with God can only be found in Christ: “God hath given to us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He that hath the Son hath life, and he that hath not the Son of God hath not life” (1 John 5: 11-12). Therefore, for the faithful, eternal life begins on earth when Christ is embodied in him and man identifies with the Beloved Son. The reception of the Holy Communion, the union with Christ through it, is nothing but a foretaste of the final victory, an anticipation of the joy of full communion with God.

For the one in whom the Risen Christ lives, death no longer exists; nevertheless even for such a Christian, death retains a tinge of fear. This

makes the preparation for the passage to eternal life an important component of the pastoral care for the elderly.

In Orthodox spirituality, this preparation is made progressively, in the parish community, ever since the period when man is in his full mental and physical strength, and grows more intense as age, disease and suffering take over the Christian. Man thinks of death, prepares himself for the encounter with death and accepts, in relation to those around him, the effects of death (Iloaie 2018: 83-85). The Church urges man to use the thought of death for the purpose of his salvation, as a solution to avoid sin [“Whatsoever thou takest in hand, remember the end, and thou shalt never do amiss.” (Sirach 7: 36)], but also to get used to the idea that he is not eternal (Iloaie 2018: 83). Thus, in the Evagrian apophthegms, as a result of the ascetic experiences, the steps of the program of preparation for the resurrection day are explicitly set:

Pull yourself together and think about the time of death. Then take a look at the death of the body ... despise vanity in this world .... Then turn your mind to the day of resurrection and to appear before God (Iloaie 2018: 83).

This approach is also successful in psychotherapy. Professor and psychiatrist Irvin Yalom, one of America’s best-known psychotherapists, advised psychotherapists to talk about death with their patients in a straightforward, realistic, self-controlled way, so that priorities and values are properly re-established in their lives, helping them to heal. The awareness of death helps man to live essentially and authentically, that is, beyond everyday worries (Moş 2014: 580).

Prepared for eternal life, fortified by faith in the Resurrection of Christ and in eternal life, the Christian will succeed in transforming the imminent fear of death into a feeling of expectation and serenity, of complete confidence in the divine goodness as rendered by the psalmist: “I shall give thee my spirit” (Psalm 30: 5).

Pastoral care for the elderly is part of the missionary activity in which the priest is not allowed to hesitate. His presence is eagerly awaited for, his intervention, springing from love, must be comforting and hopeful. He must decipher together with the elder the mystery of suffering, bring Christ into the soul of the lonely, make the awareness of ephemerality yield a state of continual vigilance and expectation of the heavenly Groom. Reconciliation with oneself, with people and with God, through confession

and communion, strengthening the communion, increasing love, peace, are acts that are part of man's spiritual preparation to experience a different kind of knowledge of the world and of himself, but especially of God. Even if he cannot always heal, under any circumstances, the priest can take care and envelop each of his fellows in the garment of love and forgiveness.

Professor Stavros I. Baloyannis, an eminent neurologist, reminds the clergy that, beyond any doubt,

the contribution of the Church minister to the lives of the elderly is of overwhelming significance. Through talks and through his loving presence, the priest will strengthen the old man's sense of security and will, at the same time, direct his interest and mental activity towards his continuous growth in Christ. In this way, through prayer, continuous study, inner cultivation and especially through participation in the mysteries of the Church, the years of the old age will be happier and truly the most productive in human life, years in which, far from the various responsibilities and worldly care, the person will live more profoundly the beauty of the divine will and the inexpressible joy of the presence of the Lord (Baloyannis, trans. by Dumitru 2015).

Therefore,

the priest is a partaker of the mystery of the human soul. He listens, sees and feels the spiritual quests and inner oscillations of his faithful. His prayer and word touch the man's soul, relieving his pain and turmoil. With respect, insight and immeasurable love, he leads the faithful to peace, truth and strength of soul, on the way of the Cross and Resurrection. He lives, together with the faithful, the mystery of the inner transformation, in Christ, Who will bless his people with peace (Psalm 29: 11). The priest's connection with the faithful must rely on a fourfold foundation: patience, prayer, insight and silence" (Baloyannis, trans. by Dumitru 2015: 6).

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