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Illness and Healing through Christ*

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Abstract

There is much suffering and much sickness in the world. Human beings everywhere endure and suffer illnesses that afflict them both physically and spiritually. The Holy Fathers say that there is no man on earth who has not been tested at least once in this life by some illness or weakness, so that no one is completely healthy. Some people seek the right doctor to heal bodily illnesses, and others seek the spiritual father to help them in healing souls affected by sin and sickness. The Christian Church believes that the Savior Jesus Christ is the "Doctor of our souls and bodies", the One who came into the world to save human beings and heal them entirely, both physically and spiritually. Jesus Christ identifies with the sick, takes on their pain, He heals, but, above all, He forgives sins, He is the path to follow.

Keywords

Suffering, disease, sin, Jesus Christ, healing, Church

I. Illness and its causes

Without a doubt, if we make a correct analysis of the world and the lives of contemporary people, we can easily see that there is much suffering

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and disease all around us. Historically, diseases appeared with the fall of Adam, and each historical period has been marked by certain diseases that have manifested themselves either locally at the level of a country or community, or globally at the level of the entire earth. Diseases affect people both physically and spiritually. The Holy Fathers say that there is no man on earth who has not been tried at least once in this life by some disease or infirmity, so that no man is completely healthy. Based on the symptoms of the disease, people seek either the right doctor to heal physical illnesses or the right spiritual father to help them, together with Christ, heal the spiritual illnesses that arise from sin and separation from God¹.

Because illness and suffering are some of the great realities of life, we encounter cases in which young people are prepared from a fairly early age to be aware of them. Thus, in a religion textbook we find the following written:

“Illness and suffering have always been among the main problems concerning human life. Illness affects not only the body, but also the soul. Sometimes the sick person loses courage, becomes desperate, and experiences doubt: «Why me? Lord, where are You? Does life still have any meaning? What is there after death?» These are questions that he does not ask directly, but experiences. In the face of such an attitude, it must be made clear that God did not create evil and does not desire suffering. It entered the world through sin. Death also entered through sin”².

When God created man from the dust of the earth and gave him the breath of life, both his body and soul were in perfect health because they were imbued with divine energies. Saint Basil says: “They were free from disease (...) because of the gifts they received at creation”³. The biblical

¹ P.S. EMILIAN LOVIȘTEANUL, *Povățuiri și rugăciuni pentru vindecarea omului*, Sfântul Antim Ivireanul Publishing House, Râmnicu-Vâlcea, 2012, p. 3.

² Petru GHERGHEL, *Manual de religie catolică*, Presa bună Publishing House, Iași, 2004, p. 129.

³ Mihai POPA, *Îndrumar pentru restabilirea sănătății*, Agapis Publishing House, Bucharest, 2004, p. 14.

teaching interpreted by the Holy Fathers of the Church “links disease, suffering, and death to ancestral sin”⁴.

Under these circumstances, after falling into sin, man experiences a new state that he has never experienced before, a state full of helplessness and weakness, a state that culminates in the conclusion that suffering is nothing more than the effect of his departure from God’s perfect law. However, it is precisely suffering, illness, and pain that can bring man to the knowledge of God, to a greater openness of soul towards Him, and to inner conversion. Man, thus passes from a state of unbelief and indifference towards God to a state of “seeking” and “discovering” God in his life, suffering and illness thus becoming means of salvation⁵. “Often, overcoming suffering is not possible through one’s own efforts, but man feels the need to resort to a power and strength that is above him, namely God, as the Source of joy and health”⁶.

If we pay close attention to our lives and those of our fellow human beings, we will notice that illness is an unwanted but inevitable companion of life. All illnesses are a cause of suffering, because they make us aware of the fragility of our human existence, reminding us that health and biological life are not things we possess indefinitely and that the human body, in this earthly life, is doomed to death and decay⁷.

Each of us knows what pain and suffering mean, either because we have experienced them ourselves or because we have seen them manifest themselves in those dear to us. In Christian theology, more than in any other religious system, suffering is viewed in relation to Christ, our God, who took upon himself suffering and “by his wounds we are healed” (Isaiah 53,5). God thus becomes “the teacher of our life and our first teacher of the sweetness of suffering”, as emphasized in a hymn from the Ethiopian Church tradition⁸.

⁴ Jean-Claude LARCHET, *Creștinul în fața bolii, suferinței și morții*, translated by Marinela Bojin, Sofia Publishing House, Bucharest, 2004, p. 47.

⁵ Petru GHERGHEL, *Manual de religie catolică*, p. 130.

⁶ Fr. Florin DOBREI, *Suferință și terapie – perspective teologice*, Devei și Hunedoarei Publishing House, Deva, 2013, p. 229.

⁷ Jean-Claude LARCHET, *Teologia bolii*, translated by Fr. Vasile Mihoc, Oastea Domnului Publishing House, Sibiu, 1997, pp. 7-8.

⁸ *Kebra Nagast (Gloria religiilor)*, translated by Felicia Andreea, Liviu Papuc, Kartier

God, who manages our lives moment by moment, allows shortcomings and deficiencies for a specific, well-defined purpose. His purpose always has in mind our relationship with Him and His desire to be as close to us as possible. Physical pain is always caused by our distance from God and has the purpose of bringing us (back) closer to Him. If God refuses to heal us quickly, we must not be disappointed, nor must we despair, because He gives us something much more important—the salvation of our soul. Our spiritual health is much more precious and valuable than our physical health⁹.

Most of the Holy Fathers of the Church wrote about illness, suffering, sin, health, and healing. Saint Gregory of Nazianzus advises us: “Let us not admire every kind of health and detest every kind of illness”¹⁰. Saint John Climacus shows the positive aspect of illness: “Illness sometimes has the purpose of humbling our spirit”¹¹, and Saint Syncliticia says: “This is the greatest asceticism: to control yourself in illness and to bring songs of thanksgiving to God”¹².

For a long time, it was believed that viruses and pathogens could cause illness, regardless of our state of mind. For a long time, people forgot the messages of Holy Scripture, which warn us that our health, both physical and mental, is also influenced by the intangible aspects of our lives, that is, by the states of our soul. Today, science recognizes the psychosomatic nature of diseases (the fact that they affect both the body and the soul) and is concerned with implementing the principle of holistic mediation, which treats the person in all their complexity: body, emotions, mind, spirit. Therefore, for healing to take place, “prayer with faith” is very important¹³.

From the vast experience of the Church, it has been observed that:

Publishing House, Bucharest, 2011, p. 111.

⁹ Mihai POPA, *Îndrumar pentru restabilirea sănătății*, pp. 16-17.

¹⁰ Jean-Claude LARCHET, *Teologia bolii*, p. 57.

¹¹ Saint JOHN CLIMACUS, *Scara*, Predania Publishing House, Bucharest, 2008, p. 302.

¹² P.S. EMILIAN LOVIȘTEANUL, *Povățuiri și rugăciuni pentru vindecarea omului*, pp. 13-40.

¹³ Fr. Prof. Stanley S. HARAKAS, *Despre viață și mântuire – Tâlcuiri la lecturile biblice din slujba Sfântului Maslu*, translated by Prof. Paul Bălan, Basilica Publishing House, 2012, p. 49.

“Illness can be produced and reproduced, extended, developed, multiplied, and strengthened, and sometimes even embodied, by the «powers of darkness and evil». Devils can become one of the main sources of illness, most often manifesting themselves indirectly through illness, but sometimes directly, as in cases of possession, when they occupy the empty place of God in man. Demons accompany the pathological states they create, instilling in the souls of the suffering thoughts of discouragement, sadness, akedia, irritation, annoyance, despair, and rebellion. When such situations arise, our Lord Jesus Christ gives us a very clear solution for healing: «If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain: Move from here to there, and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you. But this kind of demon does not come out except by prayer and fasting» (Matthew 17,20.21)”¹⁴.

Satan is the promoter of evil, he is the destroyer. God is the one who restores, renews, and heals. To free them from the bondage of evil and sin, God gave His people in the Old Testament the teachings and guidance of holy wisdom, so that they might know and apply the laws of good and harmonious spiritual and moral living. “Take to heart all the words I have spoken to you today and pass them on to your children, so that they too may strive to fulfill all the commandments of this law, for they are not given to you in vain, but they are your life, and through them you will live long” (Deuteronomy 32, 46.47), for “The Lord your God will take away from you all infirmity, and none of the evil diseases will come upon you”. (Deuteronomy 7, 15)¹⁵.

Often a physical illness stems from a spiritual problem, or from the commission of a sin, whether in word, deed, or even thought. Sin inevitably leads to God’s grace departing from man, and man can become ill, and medical attempts at healing that only affect the sick person’s body do not bring the desired healing. Saint Tikhon of Zadonsk says:

¹⁴ Mihai POPA, *Îndrumar pentru restabilirea sănătății*, p. 22.

¹⁵ Prof. Nicolae GROSU, “Taina Sfântului Maslu”, in: *Ortodoxia*, XXXI (1979) 3, p. 554.

“Nowadays, it is rare for a healthy soul to dwell in a healthy body, but almost always, a healthy soul dwells in a weak body, because the health of the body opens the door to many whims and sins, while the weakness of the body closes it”¹⁶.

God allows illnesses and sufferings in various forms and for the fulfillment of certain purposes, which divine providence has in mind for the good and salvation of people:

- through illness, God can sometimes show people His omnipotence and His work in the world (John 9,3; 11,4);
- sometimes, suffering and illness serve to prevent people from falling into sins even greater than those they already commit (2 Corinthians 12,7-10);
- and in other cases, illness is sent by God as punishment for the sins committed by those people (Exodus 15,16; John 5,14).

Saint Maximus the Confessor adds even more reasons why man is tested by illness and suffering, saying: “Man endures suffering for one of these reasons:

- a. either for the love of God;
- b. or for the hope of reward;
- c. or for fear of labor;
- d. or for fear of people;
- e. or for nature;
- f. or for pleasure;
- g. or for gain;
- h. or for vain glory;
- i. or out of necessity”¹⁷.

To these, Saint Nichita Stithatul adds the following sins that remove divine grace and can deprive man of physical and spiritual health:

- j. “pride;
- k. condemning one’s neighbor and
- l. boasting about virtues”¹⁸.

¹⁶ Mihai POPA, *Îndrumar pentru restabilirea sănătății*, p. 16.

¹⁷ Saint MAXIMUS THE CONFESSOR, *Cuvânt ascetic*, coll. *Filocalia*, Vol. II, Humanitas Publishing House, Bucharest, 1999, p. 119.

¹⁸ Priest Monk TEOGNOST, *Taina Sfântului Maslu – Taina vindecării sufletului și trupului*, Credința Strămoșească Publishing House, Iași, 2002, p. 138.

It is well known that sinful parents can give birth to children with disabilities or malformations. We find this in Holy Scripture: “I will punish the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation” (Leviticus 26,31), and: “The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge” (Jeremiah 31,29)¹⁹. However, illness should not always be viewed solely as a result of sins not confessed in the Holy Confession, but also as a natural consequence of heredity.

For some people, illness leads to despair and sin, and even to distancing from God, and these things are not desirable. For believers, however, illness is a reason for testing and sanctification of both body and soul, as in the case of Job and Lazarus (John 11,1-44; Luke 16,20-22). We must always remember that God’s power is made perfect in the weak and that “through many tribulations and sufferings we are given to enter the Kingdom of God”²⁰. His Eminence Emilian Crișanul says that:

“For Christians, illness and suffering have meaning. They know that physical health is useless if it is not used for the purpose of salvation, and that illness and suffering should not frighten them because they only affect the body, but cannot kill the soul”²¹.

II. Christ, the Doctor of our souls and bodies

The Christian Church considers Jesus Christ the Savior to be “the Doctor of our souls and bodies”, the One who came into the world to save human beings and heal them completely, both physically and spiritually. “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10,10), He is “the Way, the Truth, and the Life” (John 14,6). The reason for the incarnation of the Son of God from the Virgin Mary is to heal humanity from sin and give it eternal life (John 17,3). The very name of the Savior in Hebrew, Yeshua (Jesus), means “God saves”, or in other words, “God heals”, for

¹⁹ *Îndrumări misionare*, Publishing House of the Biblical and Missionary Institute of the Romanian Orthodox Church, Bucharest, 1986, p. 601.

²⁰ Mihai POPA, *Îndrumar pentru restabilirea sănătății*, p. 19.

²¹ P.S. Emilian LOVIȘTEANUL, *Povățuiri și rugăciuni pentru vindecarea omului*, p. 16.

Jesus Christ is “The One who heals”, The One who “frees” human beings from sickness, sin and death²².

From the very beginning of the Old Testament, God made Himself known to believers not only as the One who is – “I am who I am” (Exodus 3,13) but also as “Jehovah-Raphi” – “I am the Lord your God, who heals you” (Exodus 15,21) because: “He (the Lord) has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows... He was pierced for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities. He was punished for our salvation, and by His wounds we are healed” (Isaiah 53,4.5)²³.

The history of the whole world changed with the incarnation of Christ.

“The Savior came into the world to pour out the abundance of God’s love upon it. The world became sick, falling into darkness, weakness, decay, and death because, due to sin, it could no longer share in God’s love. Therefore, Jesus Christ came as close as possible to people so that they could enjoy the power of God’s all-encompassing love, which, towards man in sin and death, clothed itself in the garment of divine mercy”²⁴.

The meaning of suffering changes with the coming of the Savior. Christ did not completely eliminate illness from the world, but gave it another meaning and value; more precisely, He transfigured it. Jesus identifies with the sick, takes on their pain, He heals, but above all, He forgives sins. Through His Passion and Death on the cross, He unites our sufferings with His redeeming suffering, and through His Passion, He saves us all²⁵. One of the reasons Jesus Christ came into the world was to take upon Himself our weaknesses and carry our infirmities! It was part of His mission to help us, to take away the bitterness and pain that each of us goes through²⁶.

Christ often refers to the sins of men in contradiction to the scribes and pharisees, showing that He wants to heal people from the wounds caused

²² P.S. EMILIAN LOVIȘTEANUL, *Povățuiri și rugăciuni pentru vindecarea omului*, pp. 7-8.

²³ Prof. Nicolae GROSU, “Taina Sfântului Maslu”, p. 553.

²⁴ Fr. Florin DOBREI, *Suferință și terapie – perspective teologice*, p. 234.

²⁵ Petru GHERGHEL, *Manual de religie catolică*, p. 130.

²⁶ Fr. Prof. Stanley S. HARAKAS, *Despre viață și mântuire...*, p. 117.

by sin: “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance” (Mark 2,17). From the multitude of healings performed by the Savior Jesus Christ on people, we can see that He has in mind both physical-bodily illnesses and spiritual-psychological (mental) ones, requiring faith and repentance from the sick or their fellow human beings. It is important to remember that one third of the events recounted in the Holy Gospel refer to various healings and exorcisms²⁷.

The broken connection between man and God, due to the weight of sins, can only be restored by the Son of God, through the Holy Sacraments He instituted, through which He shares power and grace, reuniting man with God, as Saint John the Evangelist says: “And the blood of Jesus, the Son of God, cleanses us from all sin” (1 John 1,7). The same Evangelist shows us very expressively, in the Gospel passage about the healing of the 38-year-old paralytic, that at the appointed time the angel descended into the pool to demonstrate that it is the Grace of God that heals diseases and that the waters do not have healing power on their own²⁸.

We must always remember that we are never alone in our pains and sufferings. For us who believe in Jesus Christ, the greatest comfort we can have in times of trouble, pain, sorrow, and trial is the memory that God is always with us. Just like the air that surrounds us, He is always with us. Invisible but present, giving life but not forcing things. Just as it is up to us to breathe air into our lungs, it is also up to us to be aware of His omnipresence²⁹.

In the time of the Savior, the sick of all ages and social conditions ran to Him seeking healing: the blind, the lame, the deaf, the paralyzed, those tormented by evil spirits, lepers, and sufferers of all kinds. They had all heard of Jesus of Nazareth, to whom the sea and the winds obeyed and before whom evil spirits bowed down³⁰. Among the divine powers that Jesus Christ the Savior used in His redemptive work was the power of healing, the power to heal the souls and bodies of. He preached the Gospel

²⁷ P.S. EMILIAN LOVIȘTEANUL, *Povățuiri și rugăciuni pentru vindecarea omului*, pp. 8-9.

²⁸ Mihai POPA, *Îndrumar pentru restabilirea sănătății*, p. 7.

²⁹ Fr. Prof. Stanley S. HAKAKAS, *Despre viață și mântuire...*, p. 117.

³⁰ *Îndrumări misionare*, p. 600.

of the Kingdom of God and healed all sickness and infirmity among the people (Matthew 4,23; 9,35)³¹.

To benefit from His help, we must call upon Him, no matter how unworthy we may feel. Christ has promised us something extraordinary if we turn all our attention and our hearts to Him: “And I say unto you: Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened” (Luke 11,9.10)³². Saint John Chrysostom says:

“Often, in the physical illnesses that doctors treat, the sick person takes medicine and doctors, and gains nothing from them, either because his body is weak, or because medical science is powerless, or because the medicines have lost their potency for some reason. This is not the case when God is the One who cares for us; if you draw near to Him even a little, your wound will surely be healed. For we are not dealing here with human science, but with divine science, which heals without fail, because it is stronger than the weakness of the body, than all diseases and infirmities. That is why the Prophet David calls on God for help as a wonderful doctor”³³.

Theology must work together with medical science. It is desirable for doctors to be believers and to help those who are suffering to accept their condition and make them understand that their whole life is in God’s hands. Various medical techniques, even if they are very advanced, are only “tools” through which divine grace can work, because God is the One who has given intelligence and science to men. Whenever we resort to doctors and medicines, we must not forget that it is always God who heals through them, for medicine and all its healing remedies are only means of divine work³⁴.

³¹ Fr. Ilarion FELEA, *Spre Tabor*, Vol. II, Crigarux Publishing House, Piatra Neamț, 2007, p. 383.

³² Fr. Prof. Stanley S. HARAKAS, *Despre viață și mântuire...*, p. 118.

³³ P.S. EMILIAN LOVIȘTEANUL, *Povățuiri și rugăciuni pentru vindecarea omului*, p. 43.

³⁴ Mihai POPA, *Îndrumar pentru restabilirea sănătății*, pp. 22-27.

When we are sick, for our peace of mind we must choose the means that are truly effective, not those that only appear to be effective and may do more harm than good. The most necessary and useful of all is prayer, that is, calling upon God's mercy and help at all times, especially in sickness, when the sufferer is afflicted either by physical illness or by mental anguish and, in general, by sadness and sorrow of spirit³⁵.

In all the miracles of healing performed by Christ the Savior, there is a clear connection between the forgiveness of sins and healing. Through the forgiveness of sins, the connection between the causes and effects of the illness is broken, and thus healing occurs. "And when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, Son, your sins are forgiven. I say to you, get up, take your bed and go to your home" (Mark 2,5-11)³⁶. Some of the scribes who were present at the time murmured secretly and accused Him of blasphemy. The Savior knew their thoughts and then uttered a healing formula, shaming the pharisees' unbelief and demonstrating that He is the Son of God and that, regardless of the words used, He has the power to forgive sins and heal diseases. The healings of our Lord Jesus Christ were, therefore, trichotomous restorations, and He continues to influence the sick, their souls and bodies, in a trichotomous way today, through the Holy Spirit and in the Sacrament of Holy Unction: "May the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit, soul, and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thessalonians 5,23).

If we read the Holy Gospels carefully, we notice that sometimes the names of those who were sick and healed by Christ the Lord are mentioned, but for most of them, their names are not revealed. This is because it is not so important to know the names of those who were healed, but rather the fact that these healings prove that it is God's love that heals human beings. Christ did this out of great love and mercy for people, "preaching the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness among the people" (Matthew 4,23)³⁷.

³⁵ *Filocalia de la Optina*, Vol. II, translation by Cristea Florentina, Egumenița Publishing House, Galați, 2010, p. 391.

³⁶ Mihai POPA, *Îndrumar pentru restabilirea sănătății*, p. 10.

³⁷ P.S. EMILIAN LOVIȘTEANUL, *Povățuiri și rugăciuni pentru vindecarea omului*, p. 9.

The Savior never hesitated to present Himself to people as a doctor: “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick” (Matthew 9,12; Mark 2,17; Luke 7,31) and “He took our infirmities and carried our diseases” (Matthew 8,17; John 53,5) and did not hesitate for a moment to relieve those who asked Him to do so from their bodily illnesses and infirmities. Thus, the entire Holy Tradition of the Church takes care to present Christ both as the “Doctor of souls” and as the “Doctor of our bodies”³⁸. However, the healing that the Savior gives is not simply something temporary and limited to this age, but is given for the sake of reaching the Kingdom³⁹.

The Lord Christ calls His twelve Apostles and gives them His healing power to heal the sick. The Savior makes them doctors in His likeness, giving them the power to “command unclean spirits and cast them out” (Mark 6,7; Luke 9,1), as well as “to heal every disease and every infirmity among the people” (Matthew 10,1.8; Luke 9,2). This power to heal people’s souls and bodies was then passed down from generation to generation by the Holy Apostles through apostolic succession and continues to this day through the work of the Holy Sacraments in the Church⁴⁰.

III. Conclusions

Illness and suffering have always been one of the central concerns of the Church in its search for solutions for relief and healing. Maintaining health was important both for the people who lived in the time of Christ the Savior and for contemporary people. However, we cannot fail to notice an important difference: people today are in danger of losing sight of the pedagogical dimension of illness, the relationship between health and our relationship with God and our fellow human beings. Although we live in the age of antibiotics and organ transplants, advanced medicine and technology, mental illness is becoming increasingly prevalent today, with

³⁸ Mihai POPA, *Îndrumar pentru restabilirea sănătății*, p. 25.

³⁹ Fr. David BISSIAS, *Sfântul Maslu – Taina vindecării*, translated by Dragoș Dâscă, Doxologia Publishing House, 2012, p. 52.

⁴⁰ Mihai POPA, *Îndrumar pentru restabilirea sănătății*, p. 25.

depression being, according to some statistics, among the leading causes of mortality⁴¹.

Healing people is part of the therapeutic “program” initiated by Christ, beginning with His incarnation in human history. For those who receive healing, it is a moment of celebration, according to the biblical model, but it must be borne in mind that “the Christian celebration is no longer a simple remembrance of evangelical or hagiographic events that happened once and for all, but an affirmation of the reality of these events”⁴².

Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God, is the One who gives life, healing, and restoration to all creation, and especially to His most precious creation, man. Christ, true God and true man, is the One who conquers suffering and death through His own suffering and death, thus giving people the opportunity to become “gods” through grace. In the Orthodox Church, contemporary man has the opportunity to truly understand the causes of his sufferings and find the right remedies both for accepting his spiritual and physical illnesses and for healing them. Today’s Christian is called, perhaps more than ever, not to give up the spiritual struggle no matter how much suffering he may go through, keeping alive in his mind and heart the flame that only through Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world, he can reach the imperishable Kingdom, where there is “no pain, no sorrow, but life without end”⁴³.

⁴¹ Drd. Pintilie NICOLAE, “Unitate și diversitate - Taina Sfântului Maslu în Biserica Etiopiană”, *Studia Theologica Doctoralia IV*, Doxologia Publishing House, Iași, 2012, p. 316.

⁴² Archimandrite Lecturer Vasile MIRON, *Scieri de teologie liturgică și pastoral-misionară*, Published by the Biblical and Missionary Institute of the Romanian Orthodox Church, Bucharest, 2002, p. 28.

⁴³ Fr. Florin DOBREI, *Suferință și terapie – perspective teologice*, p. 105.