

TEO, ISSN 2247-4382
93 (4), pp. 180-188, 2022

Beauty Surgery and the Christian Conscience

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Abstract

Humankind was always, during its existence, in a process of transformation, and one of his main purposes concerns its beauty and health. Latins said “mens sana in corpore sano” encouraging beauty care and care about hygiene. Later in history, people discovered different ways of improving the way they look and to repair different deficiencies of their bodies. Even in the ancient world people were able to accomplish different surgical procedures on human body that we use even today, for example rhinoplasty.

But, when technology was able to provide even procedures that could change basically the shape of the body, these preoccupations became a part of medicine known as plastic surgery.

Theology has to express its opinion about the legitimacy of these procedures when it says that God created people to live in connection to the nature and that our life is integrated in a larger existence than this short time we spend on Earth. And, especially, that the purpose of existence is to achieve the Holy Spirit in full communion with our Creator.

In this article we try to see how far we can use medical achievements and which procedures correspond to Christianity and what we shouldn't use only because it's possible to be done.

Keywords:

fate, moral, technology, care, sin, destiny

“But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not be carnally minded”.
(Romans 13,14)

Today we are witnessing a sea-change in almost everything that is the paradigm of the established life of traditional societies, from the way we talk, dress, think, work, pray, believe in God. It is being proposed and, in the last few months, which are slowly turning into years, it is trying to impose on us a new way of perceiving, and not only that, but to accept without hesitation and too many questions and without right of appeal, patterns arising from the so-called needs of small groups, but increasingly vocal people who, it seems, find their strong supporters in politicians, first and foremost, and in the ranks of those in the audio-visual sphere, but above all in this huge field that is the Internet. A recent article shows how in one US state, toy shops will now be obliged to offer gender-neutral items for sale, so as not to mislead children into choosing the wrong sex¹.

These are just a few of the challenges that not so many years ago we could not have thought of, except as part of a science fiction movie or conspiracy theory, but which today, having crept into human society, have presented themselves as impetuous necessities for the democratization of all, and have then spread via the Internet into the homes and minds, more or less trained in the segments of the sciences they cite for legitimation, of people of all ages.

For one community of American Indians, an opportunity arose for the Washington Administration to listen to their needs, so their elders were flown off the reservation where they had been stranded by those who now wanted to listen. Only, after landing, they sat down on the grass in front of the White House and didn't seem to be in a hurry to meet. When asked what they were waiting for, they replied that for them the plane flight had been too fast and they needed their souls to catch up. Of course this cannot be a generally valid case, as physics teaches us that the reference system

¹ https://www.novinky.cz/koktejl/clanek/nektere-obchody-v-kalifornii-budou-muset-mit-genderove-neutralni-sekci-40374482#dop_ab_variant=0&dop_source_zone_name=novinky.sznhp.box&dop_req_id=SM3wMTyVRLT-202110102000&dop_id=40374482&source=hp&seq_no=6&utm_campaign=&utm_medium=z-boxiku&utm_source=www.seznam.cz.

for passengers in a means of transport is that means of transport itself and not the point of departure or the route itself, which gives us the possibility of safely reaching our destination and functioning both during the journey and immediately afterwards.

What is our reference point? In a deeply religious spectrum and in a human society shaped on the basis of faith in a revealed God, all the data that is put before us must at least be checked, because the reference system is quite different. Yes, faith acts on man himself, on every aspect of his life, to the point where Christ says that even the hair of our head is counted in God's care (Matt 10, 30), man being the most important of the beings God created (Matt 6, 28-30).

It is precisely this concern for the aspects of improving and defending life that is the object of study of what in recent years has been delimited, combining the concerns of medicine and theology under the name of bioethics². Surgical interventions, in the various forms in which they are presented to us, have not only become accessible to almost everyone, but are a fashion, a "must" for both women and men in more and more branches of human activity, and especially for those under the spotlight, whether in television studios or in front of the computer. We have drawn a very broad framework around attempts to change, to improve the way we look, precisely because society tends to place a high value on the way the outside man looks - and here we already have a first contradiction with what Christ urges: "first cleanse the inside of the cup and the glass..." (Matt 23, 26), and the tumult of life seems to push us to seek ever simpler and more effective ways of making these changes and then making them last. For example, until not long ago eyebrow tweezing was exclusively a female preoccupation, in recent years young men have also been increasingly drawn to it, and not so long ago, perhaps to simplify the procedure, they resorted to removing eyebrows and replacing them with drawn-on, tattooed ones.

What at the beginning was presented more as a novel offer of cosmetic salons and some daredevils, today is no longer something foreign to

² What is bioethics? The dictionary gives a definition that leaves little room for interpretation, especially in the sense of prohibiting the commercialisation of the human body. <https://dexonline.ro/definitie/bioetic%C4%83/definitii>.

medical training institutions at the highest level, constituting a wing of plastic surgery, reconstructive microsurgery, namely **cosmetic surgery**³. Its subject is broadly divided into two main segments: facial aesthetic surgery and body aesthetic surgery.

From a historical perspective, the concern for the modification or rather correction or repair of bodily defects is not at all alien to the concerns of mankind. Even in ancient Egypt rhinoplasty⁴ was practised, perhaps for the simple reason that among the punishments for various offences the nose was destroyed.

In India rhinoplasty is documented as early as the 6th century BC⁵. According to the same sources, even Hippocrates as well as other authors provide information about this procedure. Modern plastic surgery, however, only appeared in America and Europe in the 18th century, and with the development of medical instruments, it took on an incredible momentum.

In the 16th century, Gabriele Falloppio, considered one of the founders of anatomy, raised for the first time the moral question of surgical interventions to modify the human body, considering that this is a divine given in which man is not allowed to intervene.⁶ This view was overturned in the 19th century by Johann Friedrich Dieffenbach, one of the founders of plastic surgery⁷.

In Romania, cosmetic surgery is not known until after the fall of the communist regime, when in 1993 Dr. Toma Mugea⁸ opens the first clinic of this kind, but the first interventions of this kind were done only since 1996, at first by mixed teams of Romanian and foreign doctors. It started with breast implant operations (1994), injections with botulinum toxin⁹ (1996), and from then on only the possibilities of the technique were an obstacle to what could be achieved.

³ https://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chirurgie_plastic%C4%83-microchirurgie_reconstructiv%C4%83.

⁴ <https://www.bmj.com/content/342/bmj.d1598>.

⁵ <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/23120515/>.

⁶ https://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gabriele_Falloppio.

⁷ https://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/Johann_Friedrich_Dieffenbach.

⁸ https://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/Toma_Mugea.

⁹ P. David CHARLES, "Botulinum neurotoxin serotype A: a Clinical Update on Non-Cosmetic Uses", in: *American Journal of Health-System Pharmacy*, Volume 61, Issue suppl_6, 1 November 2004, pp. 11–23.

Revenues from these surgeries have grown exponentially, from a few million to tens and hundreds of millions of dollars annually, and 10 years ago about two hundred doctors performed around 100,000 operations annually¹⁰. And this in Romania alone. Since then, the media has been providing daily news samples of the personalities and celebrities who are in the daily spotlight and who, especially at the beginning of the summer season or on the occasion of high-profile social events, improve their appearance through small or large beauty procedures.

But what are the reasons why people nowadays turn to the possibilities of medicine and technology to transform themselves, to become, perhaps, what they are not? Each of them is influenced by experiences that they present through the filter of their own life experience, and so a plethora of answers emerge. For some, personal, sexual attractiveness is important, for others the lack of friends and family support is the reason, while others are motivated by certain childhood traumas or by the messages increasingly conveyed in the media, new gender theories and the so-called liberation from the traditions that until recently were enshrined as the basis of human society. However, looking for deeper answers and turning to the sciences and to the millennia-long spiritual experience of the Church, we find direct and subjective inner causes on which these decisions depend.

If we talk about sexual attractiveness as a reason for intervening on the body in order to become more attractive, the Church's experience shows that sexuality has a surprisingly deeper, more spiritual role than the bodily one. It is the criterion of human responsibility and fidelity in relationship with God "sexuality is the criterion that determines and reveals our commitment within the covenant made by God with his people..."¹¹, and within marriage sexuality is a great responsibility: "although fully compatible with conjugal sexuality, chastity in marriage will impose limits on sexual expression"¹². This assumption will fill the souls of the spouses

¹⁰ <https://www.businessmagazin.ro/cover-story/cheltuim-anual-70-de-milioane-de-euro-pe-operatii-estetice-sanii-sunt-obsesia-numarul-unu-11691274>.

¹¹ John BRECK, *The Sacred Gift of Life*, Patmos Publishing House, Cluj Napoca, 2007, p. 113.

¹² John BRECK, *The Sacred Gift of Life*, p. 114.

with love. And love is not the same thing as sex. And it has nothing to do with liberalized and deresponsibilized sex as it is proposed today¹³.

According to the Church's teaching, man's existence also means his personal involvement in the life of the community, but also a mutual influence between him and society, with direct consequences for both. However, man's true purpose is his inner healing, his healing from sin, i.e. his return to the state in which God created him, and even more, his elevation to the purpose for which God built him, i.e. his likeness in all things to God, namely salvation. In order to achieve this, man needs to know his state, to know what he has to do to make himself right and how this is to be done. All this is accessible to man and is defined as a science of healing the soul¹⁴.

In terms of the theme presented, it seems to me that the most appropriate approach would be the problem of pleasure and the way in which it leads man towards various attempts to transform his appearance.

The Church Fathers teach that the devil is the cause of pleasure "the devil is the sower of pleasure... as well as the bringer of pain through undesired sufferings" says St. Maximus Confessor¹⁵, and pleasure entered into the heart brings with it pain. However, not all pain is necessarily caused by pleasure.

Pleasure is born of laziness, and laziness is born of unbelief, according to St. Mark the Apostle¹⁶. In examining how pleasure affects man's life, the saints conclude that it brings with it an avalanche of other sins that eventually lead man into the dock of madness, schizophrenia¹⁷ and take away the possibility of salvation "by working the pleasures of the body we have no hope of meeting Christ"¹⁸, in that man devotes himself so completely to the pursuit and maintenance of pleasure that he can no longer receive the divine energies necessary for his healing, and even if

¹³ Virgiliu GHEORGHE, *Pornography, the Disease of the 21st Century*, Prodormos Publishing House, Bucharest 2011, p. 218.

¹⁴ IEROTHEOS, Metropolitan of Nafpaktos, *The Science of Spiritual Medicine - The Practice of Orthodox Psychotherapy*, Sophia Publishing House, Bucharest 2017.

¹⁵ IEROTHEOS, Metropolitan of Nafpaktos, *The Science of Spiritual Medicine...*, p. 128.

¹⁶ IEROTHEOS, Metropolitan of Nafpaktos, *The Science of Spiritual Medicine...*, p. 128.

¹⁷ IEROTHEOS, Metropolitan of Nafpaktos, *The Science of Spiritual Medicine...*, p. 130.

¹⁸ IEROTHEOS, Metropolitan of Nafpaktos, *The Science of Spiritual Medicine...*, p. 132.

he did receive them, his inability to remain steadfast in a work would take away the time necessary for healing, according to the Savior's saying that the fruit of the word of God in the pure heart of man is through patience (Lk 8, 15).

Speaking of these enormous risks of pleasure-seeking, we must also bring up the causes that make people desperately seek solutions to the degradation to which the body is subjected during life. I said above that unbelief is the root of laziness, and laziness begets pleasure in all its manifestations. When we speak of idleness we do not mean it as total idleness, but as a certain way of man's manifesting himself, of earning the necessities of life as easily as possible. Fashion is responsible for introducing a way of life that is unusual and aimed at young people, boys and girls alike. Being a model requires certain standards to be strictly adhered to, with standardised weight and body size rules, although in recent years plus-size women have been shyly entering the field.

Although, at first glance, such a life is idyllic, it hides the pitfall of the pain of being subjected to the rigours of diet and exercise to keep the model as long as possible in the kind of shape that brings them demand from the agencies that can promote them to success. And in these areas money is invested without measure. St. John Chrysostom exemplifies that wealth and power are causes for depression by the need for them to be sustained¹⁹. Along with wealth and power, other causes of grief are greed, envy and jealousy, as well as alcoholism and drug abuse, sexual disorder and others. All of these can be found in the pages of the tabloids, in the studios of television stations that are focused on permanent entertainment, as it is called today. Professor Virgiliu Gheorghe said in his lecture entitled "Happiness versus entertainment in the media age" that entertainment is the biggest problem of our time.

The most interesting statement that we have discovered, which shows us what drives today's man towards the option of transforming his appearance, is also found in Archimandrite Spiridonos Logothetis, who, also appealing to the words of the saints, warns that people who live incessantly extroverted and who are swept away by the waves of images,

¹⁹ Cf. Arch. Spiridonos LOGHOTETIS, *Depression and its Healing*, Sophia Publishing House, Bucharest, 2016, p. 25.

impressions, incessant travel, knowledge, etc., fall prey to depression²⁰. In this regard, St. Nil the Ascetic confirms: “they leave the place where they live, they change it quickly, not the depression of their heart... by nothing diminish it. On the contrary, they nourish it and increase it, strengthen it and give it many forms” (PG 79, 189-192). He concludes that this is about those who do not have communion with other people, but live in solitude, overwhelmed by self and those of self.²¹

If up to now we have spoken of depression as a basis from which these attempts to model human faces and appearance by surgical interventions start, these being only the technological peak possible nowadays, being convinced that with the development of medical technology, we will certainly go to other levels, we should bring up an observation made by the Hieromonk Seraphim Rose when he speaks of the aim of the nihilistic revolution, that of the creation or “arrival”²² of the new man, as a result and, perhaps, as a creator (!) of the world in which one wants to live. Referring to the arts, this Christian author bases this current of transformation of the world as having begun in the age of humanism, passed through all the other currents: cubism, impressionism in art and remodelled in the modern age of nihilism²³. We find with striking similarities all those which the Fathers had presented hundreds of years before as dangerous for man and which now flaunt their presence to the admiration of an ever wider public: care for man, but cut off from any authority to direct and protect it; beauty presented as fashionable, modern, trendy, but cut off from the naturalness of the world to which man was bound in the traditional society established in the bosom of Christianity. The very Greek term beautiful also means truth. Therefore, what is beautiful must be true, must have its correspondence in reality, and attempts to beautify must logically and naturally tend towards truth and naturalness.

Where is truth and naturalness, when man’s nature is subject to sin, and his soul is hated and disfigured by the consequences of sin?

²⁰ Spiridonos LOGHOTETIS, *Depression and its Healing*, p. 28.

²¹ Spiridonos LOGHOTETIS, *Depression and its Healing*, p. 28.

²² Hieromonk Seraphim ROSE, *Nihilism, the Root of Revolution in the Modern Age*, Sophia Publishing House, Bucharest, 2013.

²³ Seraphim ROSE, *Nihilism...*, pp. 130-131.

This question should coherently lead us towards the search for healing of the passions and all the errors of functioning of the inner human powers, and their union with the source of existence, with God, so that later the outside of the vessel may be cleansed, as Christ the Saviour urges.

In his book, *Psychiatry for Spiritualists*, Dr. Dmitry Avdeev, quoting St. Theophan the Saviour, points out a distinction between the spiritual and the spiritual²⁴, namely that neither the soul of an educated man nor the body of an athlete can be a prerequisite for the spiritual life, and breaking the link between the physical, the spiritual and the spiritual has serious consequences: “in the man who has not received grace or has lost it, the soul stands like a cloud between the face of man and God, cutting off the communion between them...”²⁵. And it is precisely this that interests us and this is the purpose of man’s earthly existence that he become a spiritual being. But what if he does not get there? Can’t a man cultivated in soul and body be good? Is it not enough for man to enjoy the things of creation so that later, in the afterlife, he may enjoy happiness? The Fathers of the Church say, each one confessing in his own time and responding to the needs of the times, that what is bodily or spiritual here on earth will not become spiritual after death. The great problem is that man’s life is not, and unfortunately cannot be, static. Everything that is, but also what man does, is in constant motion, is changing, and that is why St. Paul warns that he who stands must be careful not to fall (I Cor 10, 12). Following sinful impulses and cultivating them can only result in physical and mental illness. Patience is the inclination which draws man to overdoing²⁶ and predominantly one particular attribute of life with which God has endowed him, leaving the others in oblivion, to the extreme.

²⁴ Prof. Dmitri AVDEEV, *Psychiatry for the Spiritualists*, Sophia Publishing House, Bucharest, 2011.

²⁵ Dmitri AVDEEV, *Psychiatry for the Spiritualists*, p. 53.

²⁶ Dmitri AVDEEV, *Psychiatry for the Spiritualists*, p. 81.