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The Significance of An Integral Anthropology in the Proximity of Death¹

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Abstract

The living man, as a creature of God, is an organic whole, a unitary ensemble that includes both the physiological and the mental and spiritual domains. As an entity, he is not an intelligence shackled by matter, but a psycho-physiological whole created by God whom he came to redeem through Incarnation, Resurrection and pouring of the Holy Spirit.

From the perspective of Eastern theology, the soul, being alive and immortal through the power of God, moves through the death of the body from the state of this world to the state of the “beyond”. All this reveals the meanings of an integral and integrated anthropological approach to the proximity of death, in the sense in which it is particularly important to treat any patient not only procedurally as a physical-chemical structure, but also taking into account his spiritual dimension.

Keywords:

enlivened body, conscience, soul-body communion, creature-Creator, integral and integrated approach to the medical act

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I. A problematization

As a doctor who worked for 22 years in the emergency service, I often ask myself: how prepared is the person to die? How will the family accept the death of a loved one because death often appears in a family's life unexpectedly? I have frequently encountered these special situations that doctors have become "everyday" events for us. Still, I cannot help but notice that these realities were not always easy to accept, especially when you had to notify the relatives of the patient's death. I believe that the doctor and the patient should understand this complex process - the transition to death! Also, following the complexity of the human body's physiological functions, I began to think about their connection with the human soul, the human body being an *animated body* (when the soul separates from the body, that body is no longer a body, but a corpse). At the same time, I understood that there is something that escapes the power of death. That is, man is not only a body but also a soul, a paradoxical body-soul being, and the soul does not die.

Consequently, man has life after the death of the body. From the perspective of Eastern theology, the soul is alive and immortal through the power of God; it moves through the death of the body from the state of this world to the state of the „beyond” world. All this reveals the meanings of an integral and integrated anthropological approach to the proximity of death. It is essential to observe any patient not only procedurally in a physiological structure but also implicitly in a spiritual state. Such an integrated approach in the disease's phases can help us make a more effective diagnosis and, in the terminal phase of the patient, to an approach that does not lack spiritual therapeutics. In this sense, we can deepen at least three theological concepts that can be useful to us in medical approaches in hospitals: the awareness that we are treating a person, not just a body, the understanding that every person has an inestimable value compared to the entire universe, the awareness of the need of every person for the *other*, the awareness that in any disease, spiritual therapeutics has an important role.

II. Man - paradoxical being, body, and soul

Man is an organic whole, a unitary ensemble that includes, or should include, both the physiological and the mental and soul domains, constituting the living man as a creature of God.

As a person, he is not an intelligence shackled by matter but a psychophysiological whole that God created as a whole and came to redeem through Incarnation, Resurrection, and Pentecost. In this context, the patient should not be treated as a simple body in which some systems and organs reside, diseases being considered certain disturbances at the physical-chemical level, but should be viewed in its entirety as a being open through its spiritual dimension to the beyond and to infinity, irreplaceable and of absolute value. According to a long tradition represented by all the Holy Fathers, the healing power is attributed to Christ - in Hebrew, Yeshua (Jesus), which means “Yahveh (God) saves”; in other words, he heals. The Holy Fathers appropriated this healing of the body as well as that of the soul, considering Christ as the great doctor, mentioning and insisting on the fact that he came to heal man as a unitary whole, body, and soul fundamentally and definitively, not only in life but to prepare him for the transition to death. Death saves man from many evils of body and soul, as the Fathers say, and it should not be considered something to be feared because it follows sin and is its punishment. “Although the distance through disobedience brought us death, God put it at the service of our salvation”, says Saint John Chrysostom, who considers death “rather a gesture of care than a punishment” (2). This is because it is through death that we free ourselves from death, life here being life in death.

Starting from the unity of the human being, soul-body, from the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, who assumes in His Person the whole of humanity, not just a part, which He heals, we understand that there are no bodily diseases without any connection with the spiritual state of man, or mental illnesses that do not also affect the human body.

The disease brings the thought of man to an internalization of the meaning of life and the understanding to some extent, of a presence in

his being beyond the biological. Often when illness occurs, the person concerned asks the question “why?” Or “why me?” Especially when incurable diseases appear, such as cancer or in the current Covid-19 pandemic, which has taken humanity by surprise due to the complexity of its manifestations and the impossibility of finding an effective therapeutic scheme for many patients for the time being. Is the disease a purely organic manifestation? This must be the medical interrogation. I believe that the doctor should remind his patients that disease, physical decay, and death are part of the very condition of our existence in this world and that medicine, in its ramifications, allopathic or alternative, can alleviate human suffering. Still, it will never succeed in abolishing the suffering of men; it cannot stop aging, prevent the coming of death, or save man from sudden death. Through its interventions, medicine heals and postpones but does not permanently suspend death. From this perspective, both the causes of disease as a temporary human condition and the cures of diseases do not only belong to medicine but have transcendent sources, on which, if we want an integrated medicine, we must reflect continuously.

That is why there is a need for reciprocity in the act of healing man, made up of body and soul. In this sense, we indicate some of the practices of the Church for the healing of man:

1. Prayer. Man in prayer strengthens his communion with Christ and the Saints, remains in communion with the Church, and spiritually unites with the Holy Trinity. In prayer, it is about a transfer of energies and power from God to the person praying. A beginning of healing that takes place in the spiritual part of man with a determining influence on the human body. Scripture and the Fathers show us that prayer full of faith heals! One of the most powerful prayers, which involves a long method and practice, is Jesus' Prayer -the Prayer of the heart, the union of the mind with the heart.
2. The Sacraments of the Church. Man receives healing in all the Sacraments of the Church - in which God is real and active. In the case of an illness, we can receive the greatest healing powers in the Sacrament of the Eucharist, following the Sacrament of Confession, and in the Sacrament of Holy Unction. These are

from the time of the Savior, and the Scriptures show us that the anointing with oil in the Sacrament of Holy Unction healed the sick (Mk 6, 13). The Sacrament of Holy Unction is shared with all the suffering, not just those who are in the terminal phase.

3. The use of holy water - in which God is present and working - is done to heal the soul and body of those who believe, united with faith and the sign of the holy cross.

If profane medicine needs to open dialogically and practically towards the therapeutic work of the Church, the Church needs to integrate profane medicine in all that it brings to man's physical and spiritual benefit. Let's remember that the evangelist Luke was a doctor by profession (Col 4, 4). When the Holy Fathers talk about the body's medicine they use the Hippocratic categories. The Church accepted the medical practices that brought man care and healing, and the Fathers accepted the medical act and doctors. However, there are maximalist, rigorous positions of some Christians who refuse the doctor's intervention for reasons of faith but are isolated.

Because diseases have natural and metaphysical causes, understanding integral anthropology is needed, the clinical analysis of the patient cannot respond to the diversity of reactions to the same treatment. This disproportion exists between the speed of healing and the cause of the disease, the difficulty of benign diseases to be cured, and the spontaneous recovery from serious illnesses; all show the significance of integral anthropology concerning the personal life body-soul of the sick person and his relation to God, which, sometimes, contrary to the diagnosis and clinical predictions, heals and elevates the person. The nature of man, body-soul, and its eternal path show more than once the limits of medicine in what it means to understand the disease, the patient, and the ways to cure. At the same time, Christ is the doctor of doctors precisely because He approached the man in the entirety of his being, body, and soul. He did not heal man's body without healing his soul, and He healed not only the soul of those who came to Him and asked Him for help in sickness but also the body - an integral medicine illustrated in the work of Christ, the Doctor of our souls and bodies.

III. Man facing death

If the disease is the consequence of breaking a multiple communion, soul-body, creature-Creator and means gradual disorganization on a spiritual and biological level, healing can come by restoring the communion of soul-body, creature-Creator. This leads to a gradual organization of man along the lines of a life not exclusively biological nor exclusively spiritual but spiritual-biological, centered in the personal communion principle of divine and eternal life. That is why we can say not only from a theological perspective but also from a strictly medical one that the soul will always suffer alongside the body because it has its roots embedded in the body's biological structures, like any other kind, and that any bodily suffering is conscious and received by the soul.

This aspect must be understood from the perspective of the transition to death, that is, the preparation of man both physically and especially spiritually to accept, to realize that death is in itself a transition into another dimension, a threshold of transition from a way of existence to another; through faith, we can see this passage as beneficial because it takes us out of the limitations of life, lifts us from the "bed of pain and suffering"; it is a complex trial for the man who stuck more to the earthly life and for those who no longer have hope for another life and in God.

At whatever age of life the disease intervenes, it must be an opportunity for self-knowledge and introspection, a moment when we stop from daily concerns related to the matter to discover a spiritual deepening that belongs to the inner structures and springs of our being, built *in the image of God*. At the same time, it opens a dialogue with ourselves and communicates with our peers, on whose kindness the sick person depends more and more. Death is not the end of life but the end of the current form of the body. Orthodox theology considers that even after death, the body maintains an indissoluble connection with the soul and continues to belong to a person, only separated from the soul until the resurrection. That is why we advocate for an integral and integrated anthropology in the medical act and a spiritual reflection on man in the different phases of the disease, in the

perspective of a cure or improvement of the disease state, by activating the powers of the soul in the body and the life of the patient.

Therefore, each person has an inestimable value of something material and is called to eternal life in communion with God. Every man is built in the image of the eternal One whom we identify with Jesus Christ, the Logos, the Image of the Father. Man is both body and soul together, paradoxically twinned, hence the premise of an integral approach to anthropology and the medical act.