
THE ORTHODOX THERAPY ON ILLNESS AND SUFFERING A MISSIONARY EVALUATION

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Abstract

Illness and suffering are consequences of original sin and our personal sins. Orthodox therapy emphasises the necessity of healing, starting from an awareness of sins up to the remission of these sins by the Saviour, through the Holy Mystery of Confession. Besides this, in order to obtain salvation, the Mystery of Holy Unction is essential. In Orthodox therapy healing has a soteriological value; it refers to both soul and body, and the vision of illness and suffering has a positive significance connected to God's providence. It is regarded as an antidote against despair.

Keywords: suffering, Orthodox therapy, thaumaturge, repentance, remission of sins

1. Introduction

We live in a world affected by illnesses, afflictions and sufferings of all kinds. These deepen the anxiety of contemporary man, especially when such suffering conflicts with conveniences he expects. At the same time, all of these influence our sensitivity towards our fellow creatures and especially impact our awareness of the relation between illness and sin. Things are more complicated for post-modern man, as he is confused by the explanations of secular therapies which consider illness to be only an inner conflict caused by hidden inner processes and traumatic experiences in the subconscious. Being confused, it is difficult for him to understand that illness is a consequence of original sin and of his personal sins. One of the most difficult issues Orthodox Theology must face refers to the fact that illness and suffering, if not treated properly, lead to despondency, despair and eventually, depression. Consequently, Theology, as an antidote, underlines the positive significance of illness and suffering and connects it naturally to God's providence, but also to the divine economy.

From the perspective of Orthodox therapy, healing is not only necessary for the physical body; it is a spiritual reality, an integral healing of the whole human person, with fundamental soteriological valences. Therefore, in Orthodox

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therapy there are some fundamental dimensions that represent stages of the healing process: 1) first, awareness of the sin; 2) second, the great virtue of repentance, without which one cannot refer to healing; and 3) third, the epitimia received as amendment and the accomplishment of healing as an authentic therapeutical act.

Alternatives to Orthodox therapy consist in either the thaumaturgical manifestations of the sects or groups that have nothing in common with the teaching and tradition of the Church, or in other ‘Orthodox’ therapies that increase the danger of confusion and of turning the Church into a thaumaturgical sect. When all these therapies are found in the ecclesiastical space, we are confronted with a great issue of credibility: the Church becomes a space where pietism and credibility substitute for the deeply spiritual dimensions of authentic faith. More seriously, it also encourages Church attendance only for ‘solving’ problems, pains, suffering, illnesses and afflictions, with a strongly opportunistic attitude. All of these issues will be approached in this study in an attempt to find the authentic Orthodox solutions to these daily trials and challenges.

2. The relation between illness and sin from an Orthodox perspective

Referring to the prayer of the mind and to man’s mind, which remembers God incessantly when it is purified, father Ioannis Romanidis writes: “The whole issue in question has to do with the discovery of the Europeans for the Europeans, through the psychoanalysts following Sigmund Freud, of the subconscious in man and by acknowledging that man is not exhausted in intelligence, but there are hidden insights or experiences of human thinking, which, repressed under dominant behaviours, rules or conformity to good behaviours, have been forgotten by intelligence, but smoulder in the subconscious and unperceivably influence people’s judgments, motivations and deeds.” [1]

According to the Holy Fathers, illness is the stagnation, death and haze of the mind. In this state, the mind’s functioning is limited, being confounded with reason, passions and background conditions. All the problems called ‘psychological’ come out of this anomaly. Contemporary psychologists do not know this state precisely; therefore, they cannot understand the real problems of people. The reader is invited to analyse the chapter ‘The Mind’ in the book *The Orthodox Psychotherapy* of Metropolitan Hierotheos Vlachos [2].

According to Saint Symeon the New Theologian, man’s soul is dead if it does not have the energy of the Holy Spirit, which is the soul of the soul and mind of our mind. “Just as our body, whether it is sick or not, cannot move without the soul, in the same way, the soul, whether it commits sins or not, is dead or cannot live eternal life completely without the Holy Spirit” [Saint Gregory Palama, *Omilii*, XXXI, PG 151, 396C; cf. 388B].

2.1. Illness – consequence of the original sin

“By deceiving Adam and in this way gaining mastery over him, the devil deprived him of his authority and proclaimed himself lord of this world. For in the beginning God appointed man to be the lord of this world and the master of visible things (Genesis 1.26). On this account, fire had no power over him, water did not drown him, no animal injured him, and poisonous snakes had no effect on him. But once he had been deceived, he surrendered his lordship to his deceiver. For this reason, sorcerers and magicians, through the use of diabolic energy, become with God’s permission miracle-workers: they have power over poisonous snakes and they challenge fire and water, as was exemplified by the followers of Jannes and Jambres who opposed Moses and by Simon who resisted the chief apostle, Peter.” [3]

“The first sin is that of Adam’s free will, inclined towards evil. Therefore he was the only free among the dead (Psalm 8.6), not having the sin for which death appeared. Committing and knowing sin obviously pertains to free will.” [4]

“The first man could indeed, without any hindrance, apprehend and enjoy sensory things by means of the senses and intelligible things with the intellect. But he should have given his attention to the higher than to the lower, for he was as able to commune with intelligible things through the intellect, as he was with sensory things through the senses. I do not say that Adam ought not to have used the senses, for it was not for nothing that he was invested with a body. But he should not have indulged in sensory things. When perceiving the beauty of creatures, he should have referred it to its source and as a consequence have found his enjoyment and his wonder fulfilled in that, thus giving himself a twofold reason for marveling at the Creator. He should not have attached himself, as he did, to sensory things and have lost himself in wonder of them, neglecting the Creator of intelligible beauty.

Thus Adam used the senses wrongly and was spellbound by sensory beauty; and because the fruit appeared to him to be beautiful and good to eat, he tasted it and forsook the enjoyment of intelligible things.” [5]

2.2. Illnesses – consequences of the personal sins

Bishop Lukas (Voiono-Iasenetski) wrote on this topic: “The causes of many illnesses of the soul are not known even to the most scholarly psychiatrists. For example, we do not know the causes of raging madness, but it seems beyond any doubt that out of those affected by it, a certain percentage are completely possessed by demons.” [6]

In his article, ‘The mental illness: punishment or cross?’, Metropolitan Anthony Bloom writes: “In the writings of Saint John of Kronstadt there is a passage which can make us think, but which cannot be overlooked. Mentioning the illnesses of the soul, the Saint writes that there are souls so fragile that the rudeness and cruelty of the world around would crush them – and the Lord

allows the curtain of the mental illness to fall between them and the world, so as to protect them from what might damage their integrity. And behind that curtain the soul becomes mature, transforms itself and man develops. This passage remained engraved in my memory, because I have seen such a case myself.” [6, p. 28-29]

2.3. The positive significance of illness and suffering from an Orthodox perspective

Such an attitude implies admitting that illness has a meaning and a finality that transcends physical nature. Indeed, considering it only in connection to itself would mean having a negative and sterile vision of illness and to increase physical suffering by moral suffering, caused by the feeling of its absurdity. In general, the consequence of such an attitude allows the demons to act freely and the passions to develop in the soul, passions such as: fear, anxiety, anger, akedia, revolt, despair. These states not only do not relieve the body, but most often increase the symptoms of the evil that affects it [7] and especially cause the soul to fall ill. Illness experienced in this way is useless suffering and for man it becomes a source of spiritual decay, which endangers the soul as much as the body, if not more.

As it shatters one’s whole being, such an illness calls into question the false previous balance and it makes man wonder about the foundations of his existence. It weakens many of the vicious connections to this world, revealing its vanity and leads to overcoming its limits. “The illnesses, remarks Saint Nikitas Stithatos, rarefy the earthly sensations of the soul.” [8]

The intelligence, purified by these burdens that alienated it towards the body, and sharpened through suffering, conceives another world, a spiritual one, and the will expropriated by itself, aspires towards this world and raises the soul to it. Dostoevsky emphasised many times this power of suffering to awaken and develop conscience. In *A Writer’s Diary* he reaches this conclusion: “Consequently, conscious is the one who suffers” [9]. He again wrote: “a healthy man is always an earthly, material man [...]. But as soon as he falls ill and the natural, earthly order of his body is damaged, he is revealed the possibility of another world, and as the illness aggravates, his relations with this world narrow down.” [10]

Understood and lived like this, the effect of illness is not the crush of man under the burden of “this body of death” (Romans 7.24), but, on the contrary, his return to God, his re-union with Him, his approach to Him as his real beginning and end, giving wisdom to his mind; that is, the real knowledge of the world, of himself and of God and offering his will the rectitude of its conformity with that of its Creator. “God did not allow illness in order to make us fall, affirms Saint John Chrysostom, but in order to make us better, wiser and more obedient to His will, which is the foundation of all salvation” [11].

3. The Orthodox therapy – soteriological healing for the soul and the body

When we refer to healing we do not understand it as simply the healing of the body; it is not only an exterior, visible healing that ends in some exterior changes. Instead, Orthodox therapy refers to healing that mainly takes place in the depth of man's heart. This is not just a simple moral theory, but an interior healing. Comparing the healing of the body, which is the purpose of doctors, to the healing of the soul, which priests take care of, we consider healing of the soul to be more exhausting. The reason is that the medicine of the body deals only with visible things and is incapable of seeing what is at the depth of the heart. In other words, the medicine of the body deals more with the visible things and can understand and heal very little of those that are, actually, the cause of many anomalies of the body, whereas spiritual medicine deals with the depths of the heart [12].

3.1. Fundamental elements of the Orthodox therapy

Christ is the absolute model, as it is mentioned in the Biblical texts: “for in him all the fullness was pleased to dwell” (Colossians 1.19), he represents “maturity, having reached the very fullness in Christ” (Ephesians 4.13). Besides, He is the one who proclaims Himself a model “I have given you an example so that you too would do what I have done to you” (John 13.15); “If anyone desires to come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me” (Matthew 16.24, Mark 8.34, Luke 19.23). “Therefore, be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect” (Matthew 5.48), taking into consideration that “Christ is the image of God” (2 Corinthians 4.4); “learn from me because I am gentle and humble of heart, and you will find rest for your souls” (Matthew 11.29).

Through the assumption of the model offered by Christ, the human person becomes a model to follow: “be an example of good works in all things” (Titus 2.7), “be an example for those who believe: in speech, in your way of life, in love, in spirit, in faith, and in purity (1 Timothy 4.12), or “let your light shine before all, so that they may see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 5.16). Saint Seraphim of Sarov said: “Acquire inner peace and thousands around you will find their salvation” [7, p. 97].

Assuming the saints as models is based on the actualisation of these exhortations in their persons. Their purpose is to reach archetypal perfection, not merely suggested, but in fact revealed to us in the person of the Saviour Jesus Christ.

The Desert Fathers and the Fathers that shared the same spiritual experiences revealed a psychology of man that concentrates on the following four elements: humbleness, obedience, repentance and love. All these four themes cover all the aspects of the transformation of the human mind on its way to illumination. They include all of the elements we find in patristic texts in the context of monks who estrange themselves or flee from the world in hope for

perfection and salvation.

According to patristic psychology, the first step towards the spiritual world is practicing humbleness. Humbleness is, to quote a desert father, “the tree of life which takes us to zenith”. We learn humbleness admitting that because our desires and inclinations lead to sin, there is a great abyss that prevents us from following the way to holiness. Our first spiritual step involves a denial of our non-authentic ego, promoted by the ‘ego generation’, in which we find all the seeds of self-development, self-justification and self-sufficiency through a willing impulse to find one’s inner self, to find Christ inside us and salvation. Self-awareness begins with denying oneself, which in turn starts with the humble transfer of priorities from ‘me’ to ‘you’. A humble man is honest to himself only when he escapes the tyranny of the sinful ego [13].

3.1.1. The awareness of sin in the therapy

Orthodox doctrine aims at the deep transformation of the human person, which is also the aim of its reconstruction psychotherapies. This involves applying the Socratic dictum ‘Know thyself!’ and according to Father Ilarion Felea, the way leading to this is the examination of conscience. However, this examination must not take the form of mere self-contemplation; it must be an active undertaking, an understanding one’s own nature, of one’s specific way of thinking, feeling and acting.

The necessity of this understanding, called ‘insight’ by the psychodynamic therapies, derives from the fact that once these characteristics are known, the process of finding solutions and treatments pertinent to each person is facilitated. Saint Gregory refers to this when he affirms: “Why do you look for remedies that produce nothing? Heal yourself, take care of yourself, the true therapist of illness, find the truly redeeming remedy through yourself.” [12, p. 37].

In the relationship between confessor and penitent, the level of the spiritual state is perceivable on the basis of the ‘mystical intuition’ as an expression of the confessor’s discernment. For the penitent, it is the awareness or insight of the stage preceding the process of emotional discharge or catharsis, in Freud’s language, achieved through the Mystery of Confession, without which there are no major results. Simple awareness does not, however, produce a change, as Schonbar remarks [14], as the intellectual insight must be doubled by the emotional insight; in other words, watchfulness (*nepsis*) must be accompanied by the effort of changing, of renewing the mind, of thinking, *metanoia*, as it is called in patristic literature. This idea is expressed by W. James: “the conversion of a man is the passage from the periphery towards the centre of a group of religious ideas and impulses that become the permanent focus of personal energy” [15]. This conversion determines experiencing two states, as Starbuck remarks, a positive and a negative one: “in the spirit of a candidate to conversion there are two things – on the one hand the present decadence, the sin he wants to get rid of, on the other hand the positive ideal to

which he aspires” [15].

We must mention that “seeing one’s own sins [...] is not the morbid introspection of a scrupulous conscience collapsing under the weight of its imperfections. Seeing one’s own sins is, above all, an awareness of the global state of sin, of illness and corruption of the soul, of the spiritual decay as a result of the estrangement from God” [16], but this imperfection constitutes itself as an exhortation towards good, towards perfection, taking into account that the aim “is not seeing one’s own abjectness, but acknowledging the glory of God” [17], Who makes everything possible (Luke 1.37, Matthew 19.26).

3.1.2. Repentance

Repentance begins through a total resentfulness towards all improper relationships with sensory things: relationships which led to disorder and suffering, to sin, to the failure to discover God’s reasons in things. In this conditions repentance appears, manifested as a conversion, with attention directed away from the sensory exterior towards the intelligible interior, towards the Kingdom of God: “for, behold, the Kingdom of God is in your midst” (Luke 17.21). This is what Saint John the Baptist referred to when he cried: “Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand!” (Matthew 3.2); that is, prepare for Christ will re-open the gate of the Kingdom of Heaven and will give us the possibility of entering it by returning from material to the spiritual things.

Saint Maximus urges: “let us return with all our heart”, appealing to the deepest spiritual organ we have – the heart. The complete conversion of the heart expresses the stability that repentance must have, through our refusal to sin anymore and the desire to continue our life in harmony with the sensible world; a harmony directed by the spiritual values we have discovered through repentance in the Kingdom of Heaven inside us.

In the Eastern tradition, the Mystery of Confession is also called the Mystery of Repentance. In Western Theology, the name *the Sacrament of Reconciliation* has been recently gaining ground. Starting from these names, we notice that in Orthodoxy the stress falls on restoration, on personal transformation, on conversion, whereas in the West it falls on reconciliation (with God, fellow beings, oneself); there is nothing wrong from either point of view. We cannot refer to opposite visions, but simply to different angles of approaching the issue, which, eventually converge in the idea of self-restoration and reconciliation with God, with fellow beings and with oneself. Repentance – expressed through penance, confessing the truth and adopting a new style of life (*conversion*) – brings reconciliation. Reconciliation comes from and at the same time as real repentance. It is just ‘a chronological shift’, not a qualitative one. One without the other would be inconceivable. There cannot be repentance without reconciliation or reconciliation without repentance!

3.1.3. *The epitimia, the canon and the sanction*

When we refer to punishment, we must have in view all its aspects, according to the teachings revealed in the Bible. Thus, there is the moral punishment applied by people (2 Corinthians 2.6) manifested in two ways: remorse and searchings of the heart (2 Romans 2.14-15, Ecclesiastes 5.6, Romans 13.15, Wisdom of Sirach 34.1). The divine punishment is also based on God's love for man: "when we are judged, we are chastised by the Lord, so that we may not be condemned with the world" (1 Corinthians 11.33); "whom the Lord loves, he also chastens, and he disciplines every son whom he receives" (Hebrews 12.6); "As many as I love, I reprove and discipline. Therefore, be zealous and repent!" (Revelation 3.19)

The purposes of applying this negative way of change are mentioned by Saint Maximus the Confessor [18]:

- 1) acquiring spiritual discernment or, in other words, a real thorough axiological ladder, in relation to which the human psyche may remain in the limits of normality, being able to distinguish between beneficent and harmful, between virtue and sin and between health and illness. "Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as his children, for what son is there whom his father does not discipline?" (Hebrews 12.7) The emphasis is on the positive aspect of frustration or what Lipps calls "the law of the mental barrier" [19], according to which we understand better the value of a thing when we no longer have it.
- 2) reinforcing the virtues through the practice of the exercise of the will to face new trials, to try new solutions for our inner development.
- 3) acquiring humbleness, which involves being aware of the fact that the punishment, though apparently not deserved, absurd or unsuitable, is a fruit of the divine pedagogy, which means that the result can only aim at a positive change: "For the present moment, all discipline seems to be painful rather than joyful, but afterwards, it produces the peaceful fruit of righteousness for those who have been trained by it" (Hebrews 12.11).
- 4) hating sin, regarding punishment as its possible consequence, the repugnance to it coincides with the repugnance to the pain it causes: "Reject with horror what is evil. Cling to what is good!" (Romans 12.9)

The aim of the liberation from sin and the pursuit of virtue is perfection: God punishes us "for our benefit, so that we may be partakers of his holiness" (Hebrews 12.10).

Consequently, the essential role of punishment is to make the human person responsible, mature, to optimise man's capacity of adaptation. Though it is a negative way, its meaning is positive. Even if, initially, it determines disequilibrium, the equilibrium is re-established through repentance, as Leontiev remarks: "The punishment induces the state of disharmony; forgiveness brings back harmony in the spirit" [20].

The negative way of rebuking, of punishing, is, however, blended with the positive outcomes of the manifestation of providence, ensuring the equilibrium of the emotional states through the awareness of the fact that suffering is followed by joy and viceversa.

4. Conclusions

We have analysed the Orthodox attitude to therapy and the relation between illness and suffering, on the one hand, and between illness and sin, on the other hand, from a missionary perspective. We conclude that, first of all, the Saviour Jesus Christ is not a thaumaturge or healer, as many pretend to be. He is Unique and Incomparable. The healing performed by the Saviour Jesus Christ is at the antipode of the healings of the thaumaturges, therapists or fakirs of all kinds.

Orthodox healing has nothing in common with the profane healing impregnated by occultism and esotericism, reduced only to an energetic dimension, in a pantheistic or in an accentuated pantheistic view. Some people try to relate the healings performed by the Saviour Jesus Christ and in His Name to occultism, thus denaturing the truth revealed in the Gospels. In such an esoteric interpretation of the healings performed by Jesus, the stress is placed on His touch as an afflux of positive energy. This approach is blasphemous and has nothing to do with Christ and His Church. It only takes one detail to understand this truth. There are situations in which the Incarnate Logos heals from a distance; He commands through the power of His word and it is performed, showing that He is not just a perfect Man, but God Incarnate at the same time. (For example, He healed the centurion's servant, the daughter of the Canaanite woman, etc.).

We understand Orthodox healing only in the light of the supreme Model – the Saviour Jesus Christ. That is why the therapeutical elements of Jesus in His earthly activity must be understood as ascending stages of the authentic Orthodox therapeutical act. Hence, first, there is the suffering person's desire to be healed, manifest in his unilateral initiative; in other words, the Saviour does not look for 'clients' like the thaumaturgical sects. Then, there is the proclamation of the faith that the Saviour can perform the healing. Here we must mention that the Saviour asks for the faith of the suffering, not because He needs it in the therapeutical act, but so that, through faith, he can connect the suffering person to God – the Holy Trinity – the source of His healing. Then, there is the remission of sins as a condition of the healing of the soul, as well as of healing of the body, performed then and now by the Son of God, as Incarnate Logos. What follows is the healing proper, which produces joy, gratitude and surprise for the others in most cases. The warning not to sin anymore so that something worse should not occur shows that the sin was the source of illness and suffering. A very important element, if we think of what occurs nowadays, is the interdiction to make the healing public.

Finally, we should underline two other very important aspects for our topic: 1) the fact that God, even if He is the Creator of everything, visible and invisible, is not the author of illness and death. God created the body, but not the illness of the body, He created the soul, but not the sin that affects the soul and 2) from a missionary perspective, healing is important, but not absolute, it must be acquired as gift from God, but not at the risk of losing salvation.

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