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# THE SPIRITUAL THERAPY OF SUFFERING AND DISEASE

## THE SACRAMENT OF HOLLY UNCTION

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### **Abstract**

Suffering is the hardest of the realities of existence. Understanding suffering as a degradation of existence, man finds no rational explanation for it, trying to run away from the arms of pain towards pleasure. Only Theology can explain suffering, showing that it is an accident and an illness of the being. The teaching of the Orthodox Church (the Holy Fathers) definitely states that "illness and suffering are not the work of God's hand" (Saint Maximus the Confessor).

In all religions, divinity comes to solve the problem of human suffering, but only in Christianity does the Loving-God identify with human suffering, sacrificing Himself to abolish it. The healing of suffering through the Resurrection of Christ does not represent abolishing it, but understanding its meaning as the divine pedagogy of spiritual maturisation and accomplishment, through which man becomes aware of the existence of his fellows, loving them and sacrificing himself for them, following the model of Jesus Christ the Saviour.

Illness and suffering can be overcome and transformed through the Church's healing grace by the Mystery of Holy Unction, being an ascetic path to the heights of holiness.

*Keywords:* Mystery of Holy Unction, suffering, illness, healing, Orthodox Church

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### **1. Introduction**

Jesus Christ the Saviour came among men in order to heal illnesses and sufferings. He did not regard them as a necessary pain. Far from being resigned or indifferent to them, He clearly showed that they are not something to wish for, as he liberated those who came to him from these and gave examples as concerns the attitude one must adopt in such situations. Besides, He does not hesitate to present Himself to people as physician: "Those who are healthy have no need for a physician, but those who are sick do" (Matthew 9.12, Mark 2.17, Luke 7.31).

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## **2. Suffering and illness from a theological perspective**

Suffering is the hardest of the realities of existence. Understanding suffering as a degradation of existence, man finds no rational explanation for it, considers it absurd and tries to avoid it, running away from the arms of pain towards pleasure.

Only Theology can explain suffering, showing that it is an accident and an illness of the being, a false action, a wrong choice of that “angel estranged from God, who, by his deceit cleverly overreaches man and persuades him to become his own murderer and assassin” [1]. The teaching of the Orthodox Church (through the Holy Fathers) definitely states that “illness and suffering are not the work of God’s hand” [2].

The biblical and patristic texts reveal that man was created neither mortal, nor immortal, but capable of both: if he obeyed God’s will and commandment, he received immortality as reward, but he disobeyed the will of His Creator, estranged from good and fell under the rule of death.

“Through this sin”, writes Saint Gregory Palamas, “we have put on the garments of skin of this sick, mortal and full of suffering body and changed our abode to this transient and perishable world; illness is, thus, the short and hard way of this perishable life on which man was taken by sin, the limit of this way being death” [3].

As He cannot but love His creature, in His all-wise and providential plan, God puts a limit to this existence diseased by man through sin, limit called sin. Why? Because the all-loving Father cannot bear to see us struggling and agonising in this caricatured survival lacking the divine elixir of life, but especially in order not to become eternal in it. Thus, death appears not only as a curse of nature and consequence of our spiritual decay, but also as a new proof of the divine love for man, whom God created for the eternity of a life of loving communion with Him. Hence, God is not responsible for man’s free choice, but the serious consequences of his sin (illness, suffering and death) must not be understood as punishments that a vengeful, cruel and sadistic God would apply to man, because “God created man to be immortal...nevertheless, through envy of the devil came death into the world” (Wisdom of Solomon 2.23), and the “wages of sin is death” (Romans 6.23).

These evil consequences of the original sin make human nature sick because Adam separated from God-Life, and this means death and the loss of all spiritual goods, as gifts of life, which come from Him. Being the root of humanity, Adam transmits in a hereditary way this poison of the consequences of the original sin, but his responsibility becomes that of all people, to the extent in which they imitated him.

In all religions, divinity intervenes in order to solve human suffering, but only in Christianity does the loving God identify with human suffering, sacrificing Himself in order to annihilate it. God’s becoming human, dying out of love so as to heal human suffering is madness that still scandalises human reason and no religion, except Christianity, dared to affirm that God reveals

Himself as the supreme sacrificial Love, because only Christ thought of people in a serious way and solved once and forever the paradox suffering-love, pain-pleasure, life-death and because: “In this is love: not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His son as the atoning sacrifice for our sins” (I John 4.10). The love of Christ-God is real not only because it helps and commiserates with human suffering up to sacrifice and death, but especially because it solves it, as being God and becoming a Man, His love obtains through His resurrection immortality inside and in the intimacy of the human being with whom He united. Healing suffering through the Resurrection of Christ does not represent abolishing it, but understanding its meaning, as the divine pedagogy of maturisation and spiritual accomplishment through which man becomes aware of the existence of his fellows, loving them and sacrificing himself for them, following the model of Jesus Christ the Saviour.

However, suffering, illness and death continue to poison even today the body of humanity. Is Christ’s Death and Resurrection not enough? Yes, as long as people live as if Christ had not come, died and risen, living in themselves the reality of “the old self” (Ephesians 4.22). Yes, as long as the gifts offered in His Death and resurrection remain inoperative and are not assimilated by the people who, though they are incorporated in Him through Baptism, do not bring the fruit of a virtuous life. On the other hand, the Church shows that as long as we live on this earth we will be sympathetic, through the body, with all people, and postponing the spiritual fruit of immortality will be done till the end of history, because “God established a time when we will all be crowned together, as humanity is one body and there is more joy for this body to be crowned with the others than each one separately”. This is what the Psalmist refers to: “the righteous shall wait for me until you recompense me” (Psalm 142.7) and the saints “were not to reach perfection apart from us, because God had made provision for us to have something better” (Hebrews 11.40).

The teaching of the Church mentions that physical health represents the normal state of human nature, that of the paradisiacal condition, but if it is not used in order to fulfil the commandments of Christ and to do good, it may represent an impediment to salvation, making man indifferent to God, to his fellows and to himself. As concerns illness, it is not an evil in itself to the extent in which it appears as a consequence of Adam’s sin and as an effect of the demonic work in the fallen world and does not have the power to separate man from God. Yet, we see many people, especially the faithful, who, when facing illnesses ask God first not to recover, but what is most useful for their spiritual becoming and, instead of grieving because of the illness, they rejoice for the benefits they might acquire by suffering. Therefore, the Church invites us to discover that the ultimate meaning and finality of the illness transcend the physical reality of our existence, because if we limit to negative thoughts about the illness we will double our physical pain with the moral suffering caused by the feeling of its absurdity.

Illness, understood in a theological perspective, has as effect the return of man to God, approaching Him as the true beginning and ending, apparelling human mind with the true knowledge of the world, of himself and of God.

In any illness, God speaks to us about our salvation and manifests His pedagogy. In this perspective, illness appears as allowed by God for man's good, in order to restore in him what the sin perverted and to cure him of his spiritual diseases.

The sick must know that God, as He allows this trial of illness and suffering gives him the means to overcome it. If God is late in healing an illness, He does it in order to give man the opportunity to become stronger through prayer, faith, hope and patience and to improve from a spiritual point of view. It may be even more benefic for a sick person not to receive immediate healing from God; even if we ask for healing in our prayers, God can offer us something better from a spiritual point of view, instead of health, if we entrust ourselves to God and if we obey His will, not our wishes.

### **3. Holy Unction – the mystery of man's recovery**

Between illness, suffering and sin there is a connection, "suffering starts from the disobedience of the proto-fathers Adam and Eve. God loved men infinitely, he offered them all goodness and was sad and worried when he saw people fallen into sin. Through their fall, Adam and Eve transmitted the sin to all people. Personal sin does not cause physical and psychological suffering only to the one who commits it, but to the whole society in which he lives. Adam alone could choose not to sin, however he perverted himself because of the offer of Eve, who was advised by the devil and fell from the primordial state, exclusively because of his error." [4] Yet, there are illnesses which are a consequence of personal sins and also illnesses that are not consequences of sins. Some illnesses are allowed by God in order to make us avoid sins or to make us rely not only on our physical health, on our own strength, but first on His help! If people did not fall ill at all, he would not become humble, or they would believe themselves immortal, or even worse, they would forget that health is a gift from God, which they received and which they must take care of, for which they must thank God—the Giver of life and of health, as it occurred in the case of the man born blind, who did not commit sins, and neither did his parents. His illness was nothing but a mysterious calling for man to avoid dangers and to approach Christ. That is the reason why the great healings performed by Jesus were an example for the apostles to go and continue His healing mission.

Ever since they were summoned, the apostles received power over the unclean spirits: "calling to Himself the Twelve, he began to send them out two by two and gave them authority over the unclean spirits" (Mark 6.7). At the same time, He gave them power to heal the physical infirmities through prayer and anointing with oil: "they also cast out many demons and anointed with oil many people who were sick and healed them" (Mark 6.13) Hence, we understand that healing is an essential part of the apostles' mission and

implicitly of the whole Church and all as signs of Christ's Kingdom and power of healing, with which they were also invested.

After the Pentecost, the apostles continued to perform healings. Saint Peter the Apostle heals the man who was lame at the temple gate: "But Peter said, «I have neither silver nor gold, but what I do have, I give to you. In the Name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, get up and walk!» Peter took the man by the right hand and raised him up. At once, his feet and ankles received strength." (Acts 3.6-7) The same happens in the case of Saint Paul the Apostle: "God worked remarkable miracles by the hands of Paul, so [much] that even handkerchiefs or aprons that had touched him were taken to the sick, and the evil spirits were expelled" (Acts 19.12). The apostles understood the gift received from Christ; "in the gift granted to the apostle, that of healing the sick and of relieving suffering, we must see the establishment of the Mystery by Christ Himself" [5]. They understood that man becomes, in the Church, a member of Christ: "now you are the body of Christ, and members individually" (I Corinthians 12.27), that the Church represents the Body of Christ, thus "special importance is attached to the community, to the Church as body of Christ and to the responsibility of each member of the body for the work of the Church, as well as to the unity and mutual responsibility" [6].

This mutual responsibility of the Apostles manifested also in helping the sick and this is best illustrated in the words of Saint James the Apostle: "Are any among you sick? Let them call for the presbyters of the Church: they should pray over them and anoint them with oil in the Name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will heal those who are sick and the Lord will raise them up. If they have committed sins, they will be forgiven. Confess your offenses to one another and pray for one another in order to be healed. The insistent prayer of a righteous person is powerfully effective!" (James 5.14-15) These verses reveal the unity of the Church especially through prayer, because "prayer is thus the call of God through the grace granted to us, which includes our answer, through which we experience the presence of God and the experience of the human, as the human is only a created image of the divine" [7]. "Therefore, one may refer to a state of sacrifice of the whole cosmos, which is offered to God through man's prayer, so that the whole nature, including man, may receive again the purification from all stain and the transfiguration for the way of the eschaton." [8] The unity in prayer is primordial, because "in this united community it is expected for everyone to take care of each other mutually, to love each other" [6, p. 25] and this was possible only through the fervent prayer of the whole community. Prayer is necessary "because illness leads to estrangement from the others. There appears a physical separation from the human society, either the sick is at home in bed, or in hospital or in another health care institution." [6, p. 67]

The apostle mentions again the anointing with oil, "the words of James the Apostle about the anointing with oil cannot be understood as a usual method of healing of those times, because the oil, with all its beneficial properties, is not a remedy against all illnesses" [9]. Further the apostle "does not refer to a *special* gift of healings, but rather indicates the holy work in a precise form,

which was to enter the practice of the Church: its celebration by the priests of the Church, prayers, unction; and he adds to this, as a consequence, the alleviation of the physical illness and the remission of sins” [9]. Thus, we conclude that the apostles were the administrators of the Mystery of healing, continuing what the Saviour started.

“Regarded through its ecclesiastical status and through its effects, the Mystery of the Holy Unction appears as a complementary Mystery of Repentance or Confession” [10]. “It comes from Christ Himself who healed all illness and infirmity” [10, p. 1173]. “In their immediate context, the healings performed by Jesus often had the aim of reintegrating the sick person in the community of faith” [6, p. 23]. Today, in the same way, people desire to obtain physical healing through the Mystery of the Holy Unction. “People ask for the physical healing and this is done several times in this service” [6, p. 70], but “the healing is asked for in the context of repentance and salvation, not as a purpose in itself. The true life, the eternal life does not end with man’s death. Whether man recovers from the illness or dies, he needs repentance and God’s forgiveness. This is the true healing.” [11] because all those who were healed and resurrected by the Saviour fell ill and died.

Instituting the Mystery of the Holy Unction, the Saviour brought healing both to the body and soul, because man is a whole and the aim of the healing is the restoration of the fallen world and its placement in communion with Christ and the Church.

#### 4. Conclusions

Even if illness and suffering can be overcome in a spiritual way and transfigured through the healing grace of the Church, and even if they are an ascetic way to the heights of holiness, they must not be wanted or sought for. It is obvious to prefer health, on condition that it is lived in God and for God. This finality of recovering from illness is clearly indicated in the Gospels and constantly reminded in the Mystery of the Holy Unction, in which the Church ask Christ the Physician: “*send down from heaven Your healing power; touch the body, quench the fever, sooth the pain and banish every hidden ailment. Become the Physician of these, Your servants; raise them up and heal their suffering; grant that they may be given to the Church whole and in restored health, pleasing You and abiding by Your will.*”

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