
DEALING WITH SUFFERING AND DEATH LITURGICAL PRACTICE IN THE ROMANIAN ORTHODOX OFFICE

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Abstract

Suffering is part of human existence; this is the reason why Christ and the Church could not remain indifferent to pain. In His work, Christ – the Physician of souls and bodies – was preoccupied with alleviating suffering after eliminating the root of evil – sin. Following the same approach, the Church is preoccupied with alleviating pain and offers the faithful liturgical services, which were formed through the centuries, to address suffering. Certainly, the most known service is Holy Unction, but since originally this service extended over a week, other liturgical practices and more simple prayers have been elaborated to be used in case of spiritual or physical illness. The Church even addressed situations of prolonged agony, not through active or passive involvement of the community (a thorny issue in the case of euthanasia), but by invoking God's mercy. However, the text for this particular service is pessimistic, if not barbarous. As a result, priests tend either to read only part of the text or otherwise to adapt it. Adjustments to this text are necessary.

Keywords: suffering, death, euthanasia, Romanian Orthodox Church Euchologion

1. Introduction

In general, suffering, and especially death, can be very disheartening. Christ came to deliver us from such paralysing fear (Hebrews 2.14-15). The amount of fear, however, is in inverse proportion to our approach towards God: those who are estranged from heaven are much more terrorised by death than the saint, who lives peacefully in this world already in communion with His presence.

Because of sin and attacks of the Evil one, in the majority of situations man tends to improve his condition by temporarily ameliorating suffering, rather than by either assuming the importance of suffering or by eliminating its true causes. As dual structure, man lives his existence on two levels: the material and sensitive world, which is ephemeral and finite, and the spiritual, suprasensitive

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world, which is eternal and immortal. This dichotomic perspective on existence necessarily promotes two types of reaction: the faithful who regard suffering and death almost as a gift, while those who reject God see pain as undeserved or a form of abandonment that leads to despair and despondency, or, perhaps, just as empty nonsense [1]. Whereas the first appreciates suffering and death to be a consequence of the fall, the second judges such matters only as accidents to be avoided.

Therefore, the faithful come to the end of their lives with a quasi-sacrality: their beloved ones gather around the dying person and receive his last words almost as if they were divine commandments; it seems as if what the deceased says on his deathbed must be fulfilled to the last detail. Those without faith experience the moment of death far away from the eyes of the world, perhaps in a private hospital room, observed by a sort of clandestine gathering of a limited number of family members.

Excluding the existential condition of the saint (who, paradoxically, is the exception, not the rule), Christians also do fear death. However, such fear does not come from the unknown of the afterlife, but from its certainty. Christians do not worry about losing this 'safe' existence; instead, they are concerned that perhaps they did not live according to the Gospel, which might endanger the condition of the afterlife. Our preoccupation should focus on the character of our afterlife, rather than on the quality of this life. This is why the faithful man places the process of spiritual therapy at the foundation of his relationship with God: the goal is to heal and restore the human state to its condition prior to the Fall. Suffering is a reality of human nature and it can be a difficult burden to bear. Christ, Who came to rise our fallen nature, could not remain indifferent to suffering and death. He intervened in the 'natural' process of man's degradation, healing any kind of disease and sickness (Matthew 10.1) whenever He had the occasion. Thus, He was recognised not only as Saviour, but also as the Physician of our souls and bodies [2-4].

Consequently, the Church made its healing work a central element of worship [5]. As a living institution, the Church is preoccupied with addressing the real needs of its community of the faithful; it has always tried to find solutions for man's various problems. Therefore, there should be no surprise that in the *euchological* repertory of the Church there are prayers that include all of the situations that a man might face in his lifetime, from his appreciation for and use of the world, to his relationships with other people, "from the hour of his birth to the death hour and burial" [6].

In the present study, I explore the practical ways in which the Church responds to a problem that preoccupies contemporary society: suffering and agony before death, as well as the attitude of the faithful to such a personal challenge.

2. Suffering and death: causes and solutions

Suffering is a reality we routinely encounter: we suffer in our childhood; we suffer in old age; we suffer both physically and morally; and the world around us suffers, too. Death is also part of our being. We carry the reality of our eventual death from the time of our birth, but its presence is shaped in our conscience only as time goes by. Suffering is a condition of our existence [7].

The origin of suffering in entire creation is a consequence of the fall (Romans 8.20-22). Its purpose, however, is not to satisfy divine anger, but to function as a sort of spiritual pedagogy that God accepts (but does not provoke) [8], which accompanies man on his way back 'home'. Equally, death is an anomaly in the order of existence. It is a consequence of man's choices, a guilty accident that must be overcome in order for man to reach the goal for which he was brought into existence; namely, eternal communion in the love of the Persons of the Holy Trinity. This perspective on existence draws man out of the empirical and contingent circle of the senses that control him, which order and fill every life with meaning, and assigns it a goal beyond biological autonomy. Out of this approach derives a different way of regarding suffering and the end of life: the faithful person regards suffering as an instrument through which man is brought back onto the trajectory of the goal (*αμαρτία*, which means missing the mark) and death is appreciated as a means of approaching the future communion of life. Autonomy (and self-sufficiency) is overcome and death is not a loss, but a benefit. Therefore, afflictions were regarded by Paul as a gift (Philippians 1.29) and their absence was felt by some holy monks as a sign of God's abandonment [9]. From such a perspective, in order to overcome pain easily, those who were suffering were surrounded with love and prayers not only by the family, but also by the members of the ecclesiastical community (Holy Unction has an ecclesial/*koinonial* connotation [10]), and suffering acquires an ecclesial value, as we are members of the Church for one another [8, p. 278].

Therefore, due to its soteriological and ecclesial significance, suffering has positive value and, consequently, there can be only one Christian response to this issue: suffering must be assumed and used to orient us towards God. This is what the Apostles and the martyrs did and this is what we should do, too: we must accept suffering, even when we feel that it exceeds our powers (2 Corinthians 1.6-11). Because we do not always know what our limits are, we must leave such a judgment to God. The faithful should not look for the answer in his nature (whose judgments are altered by sin), but outside of it in God, our spiritual father, and in the community of our brothers. When we are blinded by pain or in a state of unconsciousness caused by the affections of our body or our mind, this state of communion and dependence on the other manifests through the family or the ecclesial community, which can (and must) intervene in order to assume the sick body and carry its burden to the end. The fact that we cannot know the nature of this saving end, involves us in a relation to God, *the one and only* true Saviour from suffering, *the only One who knows the moment we enter life and when we will leave it*. Only in this way, can we understand the prayer of

the Church for ‘a Christian ending to our life’.

Thus, death appears as a blessed salvation from suffering (Mark 13.13), but also as the only way to enter immortality through resurrection (Romans 6.9-10) and as something for which we wish. With such an understanding of death, the saint enters eternity prepared, in peace and illuminated by the joy of expectation, whereas the unfaithful, those who are estranged from God, experience death with terrible anxiety. This is why the unfaithful are never ready to die and wish to prolong their life or to die a sudden death, in sleep if possible. Hence, the legitimate question some of our fellow creatures ask: Should we intervene in the process of death? For Christians, a positive answer to this question means an ‘unfair finish’ in the race of life, for He alone is the master of life and death, and thus the only one who has the power and the ‘legitimate right’ to intervene in this process.

3. Liturgical practices in situations of physical suffering

To alleviate suffering the Church has elaborated and offered the faithful services with a particularly therapeutic character. All of them, without exception, place sin at the root of illness. Actually, physical sufferings are not a cause, but a symptom of the illness, whose root is in sin. That is why, liberating oneself, purifying oneself from sin, is at the centre of the healing ministration of the Church [5, p. 23]. For the same reason, the main healing work of the Church – Baptism – unfolds according to the following treatment scheme: repentance – forgiveness – Eucharist – ecclesial (re)integration in grace. All of the ulterior ‘healings’ are carried in this paradigm, while the remedy – *universal panacea* – is the Eucharist [Saint Ignatius of Antioch, *The Epistle of Ignatius to the Ephesians*, available from <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0104.htm> (accessed 16 August 2012)], [3, p. 189, 370].

Therapeutic anointing is an ancient biblical ‘remedy’, known by our Lord Jesus Christ and recommended to the Apostles (Mark 6.13), which they practised with the laying on of their hands (Acts 28.8-9), and which, besides healing, also brought the remission of sins (James 5.14).

Christian euchological manuscripts before the fifth century mention this practice (*Apostolic Tradition*, *Apostolic Constitutions*), some render even the text of the prayer of blessing (*Testamentum Domini*, *Euchologion of Serapion*), but there are no instructions referring to its administration before the ninth century; most likely the oil was taken home after the blessing (at the church) and used by the family in case of need [5, p. 35-40].

In time, the crystallisation of a liturgical mentality determined awareness of the catena, *sin – illness – suffering*, and of the remedy, *prayer – forgiveness – healing* [11]. Emphasis on the therapeutic role of penitential prayer, as a measure for fighting physical and spiritual suffering, created a greater role for priests in administering such anointing [5, p. 41]. As expected, this new conception (or perhaps its awareness), led to the formation of a complex liturgical service, extending over seven successive days, which included, the

proper order, Matins and Holy Liturgy, the confession of the sick person and taking communion [12], [5, p. 42-50]. This service was unified after the fourteenth century into a single ritual concentrated into one day. Today, this liturgical service remains an exceptional service, performed at least once a week in the urban parishes and monasteries in Romania by several priests; the recommended number of priests is seven. In other Orthodox Churches it is more exceptional and rare.

This service raises a number of practical problems having to do especially with the deterioration of the correct understanding of the purpose and essence of its practice. Although there are a great number of faithful who understand and correctly relate to Holy Unction, many regard it as a super-service, which is 'good for all needs', including illness, sorcery, exams and so forth. Others request it or participate in Holy Unction in a 'precautionary' way, and not few wait for items of clothing to be anointed, which will then be worn by their relatives who are sick (or under the effect of 'spells') [13].

Besides Holy Unction, the Romanian Orthodox Church's practice includes other services with a therapeutic character. These include *The practice of the communion of the sick*; *The practice at the soul's painful departure*; *Prayer for the doomed soul*; *Prayer for the one fighting bitterly with death* [2, p. 137-149]), as well as short prayers for specific situations (*Prayer in time of need*; *Prayer for asking God's mercy*; *Prayers for headaches*; *Prayer for toothaches*; *Prayer for the sick who cannot sleep*; *Prayer that is read to the sick with the holy spear* [2, p. 317-326]).

Baptism being the process of salvation, the moment of death presents the last such occasion. If we think of the thief saved on the cross, we can say that it is important for the end to be lived with the maximum of spiritual intensity. The faithful must be at peace with God and one's fellow creatures (through confession), because this is the only way in which one can hope for a blessed condition in the afterlife. The preoccupation that the sick or the old should not die without confession, communion and a candle has become for some communities almost the only preoccupation before death. This might be the reason why in some Romanian provinces, pastoral care of the old or the sick has acquired the name 'grijire'(care) and the Eucharist 'grijanie'.

3.1. *The practice of the communion of the sick*

Is generally used when, because of physical inability, the sick person cannot go to Church or observe the common ritual of confession and communion. In such circumstances, the priest goes to the house of the sick with the Reserved Holy Mystery, offering there the necessary spiritual assistance. It is superfluous to mention that the priest must accord himself with great care when he takes the Eucharist outside of the sacred space [14]. There is a practice consisting of *the beginning Prayers*, *Psalm 50*, the *Symbol of Faith*, three *Troparia* and a set of three penitential prayers, *Confession*, together with a *prayer explaining the moment*, followed by the proper Ritual of partaking

communion, in which are four prayers (three before and one after communion [2, p. 140]). The hymn *Lord, now let your servant go in peace, the beginning Prayers* and the *Troparia* (of the day and of the Theotokos), are followed by the *Dismissal* of the day.

3.2. *Practice at the soul's painful departure*

Sometimes, there are situations in which the suffering of the dying person becomes a prolonged torture, during which the community perceives the agony as God's refusal to receive the soul of the one who 'agonises' until it 'is done with this world': perhaps a sin has not been confessed or a curse has been carried for a long time; there may be an unfulfilled promise or an expected but not accomplished reconciliation. Each of these is a possible cause, whose solution might be offered only by confession. Civil society is concerned with suppressing suffering, preserving the quality of life or the dignity of the dying person, whereas the Church answers with a practice that could be interpreted as a 'spiritual service towards a good death'. Churches should not seek to make euthanasia acceptable, as Engelhardt has observed at Roman-Catholic theologians [15], but rather seek to prepare Christians for a 'Christian ending' and, at most, to pray that God will shorten the time of suffering. Actually, the concept of 'euthanasia' originates in a preoccupation with a good death, rather than an easy death. For the Church, a good death is the conscious death of the man who arrives at peace with himself, with the world and with God. No one can assume the burden of the decision concerning somebody else's life or death, as a person is an image of God. Therefore, the answer of the Church to euthanasia can only consist in imploring God so that 'He should pull the plug' of this life, and seek God. This means that man must seek God's will, rather than his own. What should really worry us is not a painful end of life, but an unexpected end without time for repentance [15]

Unfortunately, the present text in the Euchologion of the Romanian Orthodox Church is not only pessimistic, but also deeply inhuman. Some *troparia* of the *liturgical canon* do not leave the dying person any hope of salvation, others demand that he should be "left unburied and thrown to the dogs", "let the dogs eat my heart" [*Ode VI*: 3, p. 145]. Naturally, such a 'pedagogy of fear' approach may be acceptable in other situations. However, for those suffering the pangs of death, and especially for the family members who accompany him in these last moments, this text is demobilising and barbarous.

No one and nothing, not even the most unpardonable sin that has not been confessed, gives us the right to use such words in a service that should bring relief, consolation and comfort to the dying person and to his family. In a discussion with other priests regarding this text, I was told that when this prayer was requested, such paragraphs were either ignored or adapted. This is the reason why the text should be replaced with a more optimistic one: for example, the text reproduced in the Euchologion of Ioan Zoba from Vinț [6, p. 543-569], as I have shown in other studies [1].

The practice of a penitential canon attributed to St. Andrew of Crete starts with the *Blessing, the beginning Prayers, Psalms 69, 142 and 50*, followed by the 9 odes of the *Canon*, finished ‘*ex abrupto*’ with the hymn *It is truly meet*. The fact that there are no indications for the dismissal might be the sign of a fluctuating practice until the appearance of printing (in the fifteenth century) or that the canon was included in Matins preceding the special Liturgy for the sick. There is more support for this second hypothesis. The reading of this canon might also be continued with two prayers: *Prayer for the doomed soul* (of removing the effects of a possible curse: “cast away all evil and free him from all curse” [2, p. 148]) and *Prayer for the one fighting death* which refers to the same themes: ‘casting all evil and curse and relieving suffering’.

Leaving aside other prayers for situations of illness and needs as mentioned earlier, and which do not have any special peculiarity, I will focus on strange and less known practice:

3.3. Prayer that is read to the sick with the holy spear

This is a practice of Slavic-Russian origin, about which the present Romanian Euchologion does not give many indications. The rubrics include the *Blessing, the beginning prayers, Psalm 69* and three troparia, one of which is taken from the *Practice of the Proskomede (Thou hast redeemed us...)* without mentioning the circumstances or how it is proceeded. In the Slavic-Russian tradition, after the *Proskomede* and after saying the prayers, the priest makes the sign of the cross with the spear in the water, which is then given to the sick to drink.

The esoteric character of this service, which is not a proper blessing of the water or an explicit prayer for the sick, makes me think that it is rather a ritual of washing the spear, which was turned into a magical practice. Consequently, I consider this practice one that should be eliminated from the Euchologion and from pastoral practice.

4. Conclusions

All these practices show the answer of the Church to concrete situations in which its members might find themselves. Suffering is saving, but it is not sent, but allowed by God. Suffering is saving only if it is assumed in a conscious way. Suffering can be lived as a time of return to God and as a ferment of reorganisation of one’s own values. Those who are in physical pain and discover that they are ‘at God’s mercy’ can accept suffering as a pedagogical measure (Job) or they can curse God.

This is the same reason why the answer to prolonged agony must not mean suppressing life or avoiding suffering through sinful action (euthanasia). If we understand that not this life, but the next one deserves all of our attention, we will perceive suffering as a time of repentance, a period of preparation for ‘a Christian ending to our life’.

Certainly, some of the practices for situations of illness and suffering in the present Euchologion of the Romanian Orthodox Church are susceptible to change (*Practice at the soul's painful departure*), and others even eliminated (*Prayer that is read to the sick with the holy spear*).

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