
THE HEALING MINISTRY OF JESUS CHRIST IN THE ICONOGRAPHIC REPRESENTATIONS OF THE EASTERN ORTHODOX CHURCH THEOLOGICAL MEANINGS

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Abstract

The aim of the present study is to point out the faith of the Church based on biblical texts and patristic thinking which says that Christ the Incarnated God is the Doctor of our souls and bodies. This faith is reflected in a multitude of prayers and in the iconographic program of the Orthodox Church. One element which is common to a variety of biblical texts, liturgical services, gestures and rituals is the lay of hands. This sign we can see also in our iconographic representations. The main meaning of this is the power of healing which is Christ power given to His Church and achieved through its worship and iconography.

Keywords: healing, iconography, healing services, Jesus healings, iconographic program

1. Christ the Healer – general overview

The idea behind the presentation of this theme was generated by the Romanian Orthodox Church Synod decision to dedicate and declare 2012, the year of the *Sacrament of the Anointing and Care for the Sick*, all across the Romanian Patriarchate. This reveals a clear intention to engage and stimulate the conversation of the theological academia circles, around themes like the suffering and its profound and diverse implications in the life of the faithful, as well as to identify new pastoral and practical solutions that would support creatively the Church ministry of the sick - all within a context and a society where the physical and 'soul' suffering, seems to be daily on an upward and alarming trend.

In the Orthodox liturgical conscience, Christ is the Doctor of our souls and bodies, a conscience rooted and sourced by the Sacred texts of the Scripture. (We find this title in a multitude of prayer part of different services: Anointing of the Sick, The Anaphora Prayer of Saint Basil's Great Liturgy, in the service of the blessing of the water, in particular the closure verbal formulas said in a

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loud voice, at the end of the different healing prayers captured in today's Evhologions.) Here we give just a handful of examples.

In the Gospel of Matthew, we are told that: „... Jesus went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, and preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing all manner of sickness and all manner of disease among the people. And his fame went throughout all Syria: and they brought unto him all sick people that were taken with divers diseases and torments, and those which were possessed with devils, and those which were lunatic, and those that had the palsy; and he healed them.” (Matthew 4.23-24, 9.35, KJV)

The same evangelist, in a different place, writes the following: “And when they were gone over, they came into the land of Gennesaret. And when the men of that place had knowledge of him, they sent out into all that country round about, and brought unto him all that were diseased; And besought him that they might only touch the hem of his garment: and as many as touched were made perfectly whole.” (Matthew 14.34-36, Mark 6.55-56, KJV). The first paragraph determines the conclusion that the physical healing is tightly related to the spiritual healing (mind and soul), offered along with the redeeming teaching. Christ was teaching and healing the multitudes. The second Gospel paragraph describes the fact that the simple touching of Christ garments would heal the suffering. This fact is being described actually, in other places as well. In Luke's Gospel (chapter 8), the inspired writer describes the healing of a whom who had a blood issue for twelve years and who came to Jesus and, touching his garment, became healed immediately (Luke 8.43-47, KJV).

The healing power was given by Christ, as a gift, to His Church, though the Apostles. He sends his disciples to preach the Good News and while doing that, He is telling them: „And these signs shall follow them that believe; In my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues; They shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover.” (Mark 16.17-18) The liturgical gestures of laying hands on the faithful and the invocation of God's healing hand that would heal and comfort those in suffering, are frequently present within the contexts of Eucharist and the other Church Sacraments [1].

The faith and conviction that the Apostles have received the healing gift from Jesus Christ is present among the faithful ever since the first days of ,the new faith'. The *Book of Acts* for instance states the following: „And by the hands of the apostles were many signs and wonders wrought among the people; (and they were all with one accord in Solomon's porch. And of the rest durst no man joins himself to them: but the people magnified them. And believers were the more added to the Lord, multitudes both of men and women.) Insomuch that they brought forth the sick into the streets, and laid *them* on beds and couches, that at the least the shadow of Peter passing by might overshadow some of them.” (Acts 5.12-15, KJV)

This conviction was strengthened in time, even more, in the latter centuries of the Church life. Having such a conscience that Christ is the healer of our bodies and soles all together, his healing ministry of the human kind

continues in the Church, though the ministry of the sacramental hierarchy. An old writing gives the bishop the following recommendation: “Therefore, as a compassionate physician, heal all that have sinned, making use of saving methods of cure; not only cutting and searing, or using corrosives, but binding up, and putting in tents, and using gentle healing medicines, and sprinkling comfortable words. If it be a hollow wound, or great gash, nourish it with a suitable plaster, that it may be filled up, and become even with the rest of the whole flesh. If it be foul, cleanse it with corrosive powder, that is, with the words of reproof. If it have proud flesh, eat it down with a sharp plaster—the threats of judgment. If it spreads further, sear it, and cut off the putrid flesh, mortifying him with fasting. But if, after all that you have done, you perceive that from the feet to the head there is no room for a fomentation, or oil, or bandage, but that the malady spreads and prevents all cure, as a gangrene which corrupts the entire member; then, with a great deal of consideration, and the advice of other skilful physicians, cut off the putrefied member, that the whole body of the Church be not corrupted. Be not therefore ready and hasty to cut off, nor do you easily have recourse to the saw, with its many teeth; but first use a lancet to lay open the wound, that the inward cause whence the pain is derived being drawn out, may keep the body free from pain.” [2]

The healing ministry of the suffering limbs of the mystical Body of Christ, the Church, is ministered, primarily, through the Sacraments. This fact is well articulated in a documented manner in one book of a contemporary theologian who affirms that offering Baptism exclusively the cleansing role of the primordial sin, Confirmation, the ‘sealing’ with the Holy Spirit, the Eucharist, the sharing in the Flesh and Blood of Christ, Penance, the forgiveness of sins made after the Baptism, Marriage, only the blessing of the relation between a man and a woman, Ordination the grace of public service in one of the three hierarchical sacramental order and the Holy Unction, the healing of the physical and spiritual suffering, it is only the indicator of a superficial understanding of the role of the Sacraments in our lives. In fact his perspective and point is that though the Sacraments, Christ is healing the whole human kind in the time between Pentecost and Parousia [3].

We would like, in the following pages, to show that Christ heals, not only through the Sacraments, the word and the liturgical gesture, but also through art and religious architecture, particularly through the iconic representation, that has also the power to heal the human person marked by physical and spiritual suffering.

2. The meaning of the Eastern Orthodox Church painting – brief presentation

It is already well known the fact that one of the Eastern Orthodox Church building core characteristics is given by its inner mural painting and, sometimes, as it is the case in Moldavia, the outside mural painting of the church.

Numerous studies were written in the past [4] as well in the more recent years [5-9]. There are also a multitude of studies published in Romanian language in different periodicals that emphasize a variety of aspects regarding the icons, iconography and painting in the Orthodox churches. We mention here just a couple of these articles [10-14] about the place and the significance of the painting and the icon in the Eastern Orthodox Church, writings that point out the function of the icon within the worship framework as well as in the lives of the faithful. Regarding the functions of the icon and of the church painting, there are, frequently presented, only four of the most important, without even considering that these functions may not express fully the whole truth and understanding regarding the meaning of the icon. We list here briefly these functions: the *catechetical* function, that is didactic or educational and formational, the *anamnetic or memorial function*, the *revealing* or revelation of God's presence, an *epiphanic* role, and, finally, the *missionary* function or the expression and communication of the teaching and the content of faith [5, p. 122-124; 15; 16]; while the sacramental-liturgical role of the painting was less under scrutiny of the theological academia analysis, particularly the icons relations with the Church prayer life in general. Referring to this aspect, a theologian of 20th century states: „...the icon is not only created or inspired by the Church worship, but it also forms together with the whole worship framework, an homogenous whole; the icon fulfils this framework as well as explains it, while expanding the own influence and impact towards the faithful spiritual life. *The content and the meaning of the icon and the worship are identical and that is why their language is the same, common.* It is the same symbolism, the same sobriety, the same depth of the same content...” [17] The sacred art, considered in this perspective, says Father Ene Braniste, the Romanian liturgist, and the art of icon and iconography “can not be understood in its true content and meaning, unless fully integrated to the Church and its liturgical and sacramental life. Considered apart from the Church and the religious life, the iconographic art can not be only partial and incompletely understood, if not totally misperceived...” [5]

Considering these aspects, in the following pages, we will describe a couple of iconographic representations that are to be found in the Orthodox churches and we will try, by relating them with the liturgical life, to penetrate and explain some of the meanings of this intricate relation.

3. Place of the Jesus healings, and the way they are depicted, according to the Orthodox iconographic program

Searching the iconographic program of the orthodox churches, as captured and described by the *Byzantine Erminia* [18] we see that all the healing miracles that Jesus did, are described and represented in colours. Here there are just a few of them:

- a) *Christ healing the man who had a spirit of an unclean demon* (Luke 4.31-37) – and the iconic representation is described briefly (paraphrased translation of the original text): “Synagogue and Christ is inside with His disciples, and in front of him, laying down, there is a man that drivels and out of his mouth a demon is getting out; around them there are Scribes, Pharisees and lots of people wondering” [18];
- b) *Christ healing a leper* (Mathew 8.1-4) - description: “Mountain and at the foothill there is Christ together with His disciples and in front of Him there is a naked man, kneeled, and with his body skin full of blotches: Christ is laying His hand on the man’s head and from the leper man these blotches fall like fish scales” [18];
- c) *Christ healing Peter’s mother in law* (Matthew 8.14-15) - description: “House and Peter’s mother in law, old, laying on a bad and Christ holding her hand and the disciples staying behind Him” [18];
- d) *Christ healing the two blind men* (Matthew 9.27-31) – description: „Christ and the disciples staying behind Him and in front of Him two blind men with sticks in their hands and Christ touching their eyes with His hands” [18, p. 107];
- e) *Christ healing the dumb and possessed man* (Matthew 9.32-34) – description: „Christ, together with His disciples and a man of whose mouth a demon is getting out, staying in front of Him and Christ touching with his right hand the ear of the sick man. Around there are scribes and Pharisees and lots of people” [18, p. 107];
- f) *Christ healing the bowed women*, (Luke 13.10-18) – description: „Synagogue and a bowed women, leaning on a stick and Christ staying in front of her, stretching one of His hand (over her head), and the other pointing towards the Pharisee and looking at them. The Synagogue ruler, with an angry face turned to the people, is stretching his hand towards Chris; the disciples, amazed, are staying behind Christ.” [18, p. 109-110]

And the examples could continue although the intention of this study is not that of listing and cataloguing these iconographic representations. We will mention though, not without a particular purpose, the fact that the designated place for these iconographic representations of Christ healing miracles in the nave of the church building [19].

4. Few remarks and theological explanations

- a) A first remark is that the ecclesiastic painting describes in colours, with maximum fidelity, the sacred text of the Scriptures. For this reason, the church painting was labelled as the illiterates Bible: „For what the Scriptures presents to readers, says St. Gregory the Great, this a picture presents to the unlearned who behold, since in it even the ignorant see what they ought to follow; in it the illiterate read” [20]. This means that God is addressing to us, mystically, through the agency of the Sacred Scriptures, verbalized as well as describe in colours.

- b) The iconographic representation of the healing miracles Jesus Christ has done, in the nave of the church building, has a specific and profound relation with the theological signification and function of this area of the church, particularly with what is taking place here from a liturgical perspective. The nave, the middle part of the church building (from the Greek ναύ, ναός; lat. *navis* - ship), is the place reserved to those that are in absolute harmony with Christ and His Church. In the old time the catechumens and the public penitents that could not partake in the Eucharist, were not allowed to remain in this area of the church, which means that the nave was particularly reserved for those who had the right to bring the gifts of bread and wine to the altar and partake from them after their consecration, during the Eucharistic Liturgy. This was the place for those positioning themselves ‘already’ in the nave, that is the Church body and community, and not for those who would be either at the beginning of their efforts and journey to enter the Church and/or of those who were part of the Church but due to various reasons, lapsed from the status of the full member of the ecclesiastical body, particularly the penitents. Regarding the liturgical function, the nave is the place where the Sacraments would be ministered as well as the place through which the human person in need or suffering (physically as well as spiritually), receives, the specific healing ministry services. The iconographic representations that we are referring to, support and confirm through colours and images, the mystical healing ministry that the same Christ ‘described’ in the painting is ministering through the Church prayers and specific liturgical acts and ritual gestures, within the framework of the Sacraments.
- c) In the iconographic representations we’ve mentioned earlier, there is a common element that is to be noticed, a specific gesture made by Christ – The Healer, every time he ‘performs’ a healing. It is the gesture in which, He is stretching his hand, reaching out the one in need, touching the head or that part of the body that needs healing. The gesture is visible also in many of the scenes that we described here, as well as those, that were not described here. In other scenes that describe the miraculous healings Jesus Christ has done, the particular posture and gesture of the hand blessing is present as well. Both gestures, described by the Gospel texts were incorporated into the liturgical gestures framework that are made during all the liturgical services of the Eastern Orthodox Church, particularly within the liturgical and ritual framework of the Sacraments. We’ve already pointed out, when reading through the text from Mark 16.18, the specific gesture of laying of hands over the sick and the suffering, gesture that is overtly put in direct relation with and expresses as well, the healing concept. With the same meaning, the very same gesture of the laying of hands over the sick and the suffering, is preserved and performed during the ritual of the Sacraments and the Eucharistic Liturgy. (The catechumenate ritual begins with the Psalm 119.73 verse: “Thy hands have made me and fashioned me...” (KJV) [21] (The Confirmation sacrament used to be, in

the Early Church, ministered through the laying of hands (according to Acts 19.2-6); the absolution, received within the ritual of the Confession Sacrament, is ministered by the laying of hands of the confessor on the head of the penitent) [21, p. 74-75] (The consecration for one of the three sacramental orders of priesthood, also, is performed through the laying of hands [22].) (God's hand is invoked, within the Sacrament of Matrimony, to unite the man and the woman that are coming together in matrimony: "O holy God, who had formed man from the dust, and had fashioned woman from his rib, and had joined her unto him as a helpmate, for it seemed good to Thy Majesty that man should not be alone upon the earth: *Do Thou, the same Lord, extend now also, Thy hand from Thy holy dwelling place, and unite this Thy servant*(name), *and this Thy handmaiden*,(name); for by Thee is the husband joined unto the wife..." [21, p. 94] When, along the texts that mention the laying of hands or invoke the presence of God's hands over the sick that are read during the service, the liturgical gestures performed, are manifest expressions of the miraculous healing ministry and continuous blessing that Christ himself is continuing in His Church, fulfilling it through the Sacraments and the Eucharistic Liturgy. Christ himself, through His presence and acts, gives suffering a new meaning, that of the source of blessing, particularly when it is assumed in faith with patience. Saint John Chrysostom says that suffering for Christ is a greater gift than that of resurrecting the dead: "Again does he (Apostle Paul) teach them moderation of spirit by referring all to God, and saying that sufferings in behalf of Christ are of grace, the gift of grace, a free gift. Be not then ashamed of the gift of grace, for it is more wonderful than the power of raising the dead, or working miracles; for there I am a debtor, but here I have Christ for my debtor. Wherefore ought we not only not to be ashamed, but even to rejoice, in that we have this gift." [23]

- d) The evolution, generalization and standardization process of the worship in the Eastern tradition started in the apostolic century and closed in XIV-XV centuries. Iconography, the iconographic *haerminia* and the ecclesiastic architecture had to undergo a similar time consuming process within the same eastern areal. It is worth noticing that the two realities, the public worship framework and the liturgical arts did not evolved separately but together, though an intermingling mutually supportive and influencing process. During the meeting of the Architecture Advisory Commission of the Archdiocese of Iasi, His Eminence Daniel, the Metropolitan of Moldova and Bukovina at the time, and now the Primate of the Romanian Orthodox Church, meeting organized as part of the Pastoral and Missionary Program '*No village without a church and no church without a priest*', pointing to the connection between Liturgy and art in the Eastern Orthodox areal and addressing the architects present, His Beatitude stated: "That architecture is Orthodox only if it is consistent with the Orthodox Liturgy. We will go out in the field... we will celebrate the Eucharist out in the open air... you will be present and participate in the divine service from the beginning to the

end ... and then you will imagine a construction that is meant to be the architectonic vestment fit to this spiritual content the you've seen, experienced and lived throughout the Eucharist, from the beginning to the end." [24]

In this quality, role and capacity, the ecclesiastical art not only adorns the Eucharistic Liturgy, but contributes also, in general, to the sanctification and healing ministry that the Church, in the name and with Christ power, fulfils within the liturgical set of the Orthodox Church. Looked at, from this perspective, the iconographic representations of the miraculous healings of Christ, in the liturgical space dedicated to the healing ministry services, that are the Sacraments, they receive a new meaning, that of 'the Church healing treatments'. The icon painter, states a contemporary theologian, transposed in the Byzantine icon the healing crafts as well as the way the human person reaches the deification stage, participating in fact, partaking, the deity status though adoption, made accessible to the human person in Christ. When he (the painter) depicts a saint in his glory, he renders the glorification of the human body as well [25]. Painting, therefore, in the Eastern Orthodox Church environment expresses the healing we receive through Christ and point to Christ as to the 'way' of healing.

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