

## **A SPIRITUAL PHARMACY**

"The power of the Lord was present for him to heal the sick"  
(Luke 5:17)

### Introduction

The restorative / healing work of the Orthodox Church originates in the earthly practice of Jesus Christ whose activity was a continuous series of healings brought about by the divine mercy towards the afflicted human nature. From the gospel of Matthew 9:1-8 (the healing of the paralytic), according to St John Chrysostome's interpretation, it results that the most important and the hardest to accomplish is the soul's restoration / healing, as the physical one is its natural consequence: "Christ desires to heal our soul's ailments and after healing the body he immediately turns to the healing of the soul." (cf. și Mark 2:1-2 and Luke 5:17-26).

The Orthodox teaching correlates illness and suffering with the original sin by which death entered the world. (Romans 5:12) Redemption (soteria) means "healing" in the Greek language (Larchet, 2004, p. 19). Hence the healing granted by the Son of God appears as a work of restoration of the whole humankind to the state of spiritual health which the Church Fathers consider that the humans fully experienced only in Paradise and shall reclaim in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Healing is a divine-human act as well as an ecclesial and community act. It presupposes the human person's will to be healed, the belief in the healing power of God, the renewing power of the human nature restored through Jesus Christ and indwelt by the Holy Spirit, and the membership in the assembly (ecclesia) of the faithful, the people of God (Chirilă, 2001, p. 13). Healing does not only mean the end of suffering but also the way in which the community participates sympathetically in the act of restoration or in that of assuming the suffering by the members of the Church. Among the members of the Church God works in wonderful ways. Healing, therefore, always borders on the miraculous, because it is the act of God, so that there does not exist any "natural" healing. In the Christian understanding of creation, the miracle is natural and the natural is a miracle.

### The Church – the Laboratory of healing

Jesus healed in two manners: by word and by touch. This power He passed on to His disciples and it was manifested many times. (see Acts ch. 3) This demonstrates that treatment and healing cannot be separated from faith, but faith does not take away the need for treatment. Early theology viewed illness as being located firstly in the mind, hence the close link between the health of the soul and that of the body. St Gregory of Nazianz (4th c. AD), a patriarch of Constantinople, called priests healers, and the Mystery of Confession an instrument of spiritual healing, owing to which the father confessor is likened, throughout Orthodoxy, to a doctor. (Stebbing, 2003, p.).

In Orthodoxy, healing is accomplished through the Holy Mysteries (there are seven mysteries: Baptism, the Holy Chrism, Eucharist, the Confession or Repentance, Marriage, Priesthood, and Holy Unction, which caused St John Chrysostome to call the Church "the spiritual pharmacy where new cures are prepared to heal the wounds inflicted by the world unto us." (St John Chrysostome, Homilies on John, II:5) We shall now analyse the manner in which the mystery of healing is present two of them.

#### The Holy Eucharist – food and medicine

The Eucharist is presented in the Orthodox world as the heavenly medicine that can bring bodily healing or doom, depending on one's spiritual state or preparation the moment when it is taken. The ritual of the Holy Eucharist includes prayers for the "mercy, life, peace, health, salvation, pardon and remission of sins" of the faithful. St Ignatius the Theophore defines it as being the "the medicine of immortality, and the antidote to prevent us from dying, which allows us to live for ever in Jesus Christ." (cf. Ephesians 20:2).

During the liturgy, in the infants are brought to Church to receive the Eucharist every 40 days, so that illness and evil should not affect them. The moment when the priest exits the altar and comes among the faithful and holds the offerings of bread and wine, the people touch his vestments discreetly, as did the haemorrhage woman mentioned by the Gospel, to cure diseases known only by themselves. In the ninth preparatory prayer, St John of Damas says: "Receive me as You received the woman with the haemorrhage. Because she was cured immediately. So that I, daring to receive Your whole body, may not be burned, but receive me as You received her and enlighten my soul's feelings, burning the transgressions of my sins."

After receiving the Holy Eucharist (which in the Orthodox tradition is given a few times a year, after a period of fasting, repentance and proper moral preparation), the faithful reads a prayer confessing "Not unto judgment nor unto condemnation be my partaking of Your Holy Mysteries, O Lord, but unto the healing of soul and body." We find here a reflection of the words of the St Apostle Paul: "For anyone who eats and drinks without recognising the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself. That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep." (I Corinthians 11:29-30).

A special case occurs when a seriously ill person wishes to receive the Holy Eucharist and is not able to prepare properly for it. In this case, the priest reads a prayer requesting the Lord to "heal the soul and the body", and afterwards, that the Eucharist be unto them for "joy, health and gladness."

#### The Holy Unction – anointment for health

The anointment with blessed oil was practically instituted on the basis of the passage from the Epistle of James 5: 14-15. Two results

emerge from the biblical account which the Church has preserved as part of her tradition throughout its existence: that the healing is achieved through faith and that the anointment with oil grants the forgiveness of sins.

The unction is offered to any ill Christian, in particular, but also within the community, on fasting days, on Wednesdays or on Fridays. Generally, the service consists of a canon of repentance, by which the Lord is asked for release from any spiritual or physical ailments, the reading for seven times of a prayer of consecration of the oil, the reading of seven pericopes from the epistles of the Apostles James and Paul, the reading of seven Gospel pericopes and the anointment of the faithful on the forehead and the arms seven times with blessed oil, while saying the prayer: "Holy Father, Physician of the souls and the bodies [...] heal your servant [name] from all physical or spiritual ailments." The content of the Gospel readings refers to physical and spiritual healings performed by the Saviour: the parable of the merciful Samaritan, healing Zacchaeus of gluttony, sending the disciples to heal the people, healing Peter's mother-in-law, healing the five unwise virgins, healing of the possessed daughter of the Canaan woman and healing Matthew of the hunger for riches and corruption.

The person receiving the Holy Unction is not always healed physically, yet it is certain that he/she is granted forgiveness of sins. This is why, at the end of the service the faithful say: "Bless me, holy fathers, and forgive me the sinner" and the priest replies: "May the Lord forgive your sins and bless you and give you good health!"

It is necessary to specify that it is not the oil in itself that has healing power but the grace of the Lord (there are countless cases of miraculous healings, from malign illnesses to demonic possession). The instrument of healing is Christ's sacrifice, this is why before any biblical reading the following troparion is sung: "Lord, You have given us Your cross as a weapon against the devil". The Mystery of the Holy Unction is performed seven times or more for possessed people, so that they be released from the influence of the devil.

The healings achieved through the Mystery of the Holy Unction do not bear resemblance to miracles and do not concern certain illnesses only, as God works through the uncreated grace wherever faith calls for His assistance.

As regards the release from the devil's possession, it needs to be approached in two ways: by reading out the exorcisms of St Basil the Great \*4th century) or by administering the Mystery of the Holy Unction and anointment with holy oil. There are no expert exorcists, yet most cases are dealt with in monasteries, where in those who heal the possessed prayer is linked with fasting and severe askesis. Recent medical and sociological data clearly shows there is obvious distinction between psychiatric illnesses and demonisation, and often the psychiatrist resorts to the Church's assistance for relief rather than use tranquillising medication.

In general, the faithful ask for anointment with holy oil as part of the Mystery of the Holy Unction in case of repeated illness, but more

often for incurable diseases (cancer, leukaemia, epilepsy, HIV, mental retardation) as well as for bad habits they want to quit (alcohol and drug addiction, uncontrollable anger, demonic possession and others).

#### Other practices and services

Ailments and suffering, which sometimes result in the degradation of relationships with the fellow human persons, are frequent, making some faithful request special prayers. These include, for example: the blessing of water, which is then used to sprinkle the house, the car or the family members, the anointment with holy oil at the end of evening services and others.

A special prayer is the one meant to avert the evil eye, read for children or for those people struck by unexpected or unexplainable disease. Here the priest says: "Hold out Your healing arm and heal Your servant [name]. Take away the pain in his head, brains, eyes, lips, teeth, nostrils, ears, throat and in all his limbs and quickly restore his health."

Last but not least one ought to mention that many healings come about through the faith in or the touch of wonder-working relics or icons. The cases concerned need to be personalised because they are part of the witness and experience of each individual believer, and such healings are not part of a set of services or current practices of the Church. They are only recognised as bearing healing grace and cannot be associated with superstition or magical practices as modern people may be tempted to think. Personal testimonies are astonishing, and miraculous healings have always resulted in strengthening of the faith and in identifying the presence of God in the life of the afflicted Christian.

#### Approaching illness in the Orthodox tradition

From what has been presented so far, it can be concluded that healing is based on the confession of one's sins, as a first step towards the recognition of the unseen cause of one's ailment, on God's forgiveness, on personal and ecclesial prayer, on special services administered to those who believe in God's power to relieve them of a particular suffering. Obviously, not all the time do services and prayer lead to healing, yet, undoubtedly, they provide a certain relief from physical pain and a certain sense of suffering, which can be assumed in a redemptive light. Orthodox theology views suffering beyond illness, regardless of the person's social standing, as it orients the human person towards God again and has a greater value than earthly wellbeing and happiness, which are ephemeral. (Chirilă, 2001, p. 11) In the Russian tradition, suffering is meant to keep the human person close to God, since the one who does not suffer may end up believing that God has "abandoned" him/her the moment when suffering ends. (Dimitri Aleksandrovici Advcev, 2005, p. 229)

We conclude with a reflection of Isaac of Niniveh who said: "God sends physical ailments for the sake of spiritual health." The fathers recommend the good-hearted patience in suffering and illness, when they cannot be cured and assuming them as a redemptive instrument destined to reassess the celestial position of the human person in

relation to God.

### Bibliography

- Aleksandrovici, Avdeev Dmitri, Când sufletul este bolnav, trad. de Adrian și Xenia Tănăsescu Vlas, Sofia, București, 2005.
- Chirilă, Pavel, Conceptul de medicină creștină, Christiana, București, 2001.
- \*\*\* Healing and Wholness, WCC, Geneva 1990.
- Larchet, Jean Claude, Creștinul în fața bolii, suferinței și a morții, trad. de Marinela Bojin, Sofia, București, 2004.
- Răducanu, Dumitru, Ce trebuie să știm despre Sfântul și Marele Mir, EIBMBOR, București, 2002.
- Stebbing, Nicholas, Bearers of the Spirit, Cistercian Publications, Michigan, SUA, 2004.
- Teognost, Preot Monahul, Taina Sf. Maslu, Credința strămoșească, București, 2002.
- Vlachos, Hieroteos, Boala și tămăduirea sufletului în tradiția ortodoxă, trad. de Constantin Făgețan, Sofia, București, 2001.