

The Church as a Therapeutic Center: The Curing of the Soul (Metropolitan Hierotheos (Vlachos))

[Ξένες γλώσσες / In English](#)



In the previous section, we said that the Church is a

Hospital, a healing center. It heals man's sick personality. If the darkening of the nous is the real illness, then cure consists of the illumination and livening of the nous. The subject of Orthodox psychotherapy should be viewed in this perspective. It is not concerned with psychological balance, but rather with the illumination of the nous and man's union with God.

There is a very telling Church hymn in which we ask God to resurrect the mortified *nous* as He resurrected Lazarus. We chant:

Let us, O faithful, imitate Martha and Mary and send to Lord godly acts as ambassadors so that He comes to raise our nous, now lying dead in the tomb, insensitive to negligence, not feeling fear of the Divine, not having the energy of life, let us cry "see O Lord, and as you resurrected from horrible captivity your

friend Lazarus once, Merciful One, the same way give life to all, offering your great mercy.

The Three Types of Christians

The image of a healing center, a Hospital, helps us see the task of the clerics, which is medical, and the whole life and objective of the Church.

There are three types of men in the Church. The first includes the psychologically unhealed, namely, those who are baptized, who are potentially members of the Church, but do not activate the gift of Baptism. Indeed, Baptism is not sufficient; observing Christ's commandments is also required. The second category includes those in the process of cure, the Christians who struggle to be healed. They see the passions in themselves; they realize the darkening of the *nous* and make an effort to be cured with the means offered by the Orthodox Church. The third category includes the cured ones. Here belong the saints, who received the Grace of the Holy Spirit, cleansed their hearts from the passions, reached the illumination of the *nous* and the vision of God. The saints are called deified because they partake of deification. The fact that they have been cured does not mean that they make no mistakes whatsoever on a human level, but they have a correct orientation; they know what the Grace of God is, and they know how to repent. Their *nous* is rightly directed to God, they have good self-knowledge, they are aware of the dogmas, and in general they know exactly the purpose of their existence.

Ways to Cure the Soul

It is now necessary to examine the ways by which the personality of man is cured. Among other things, this demonstrates the character and the content of Orthodox asceticism.

The first requirement is *correct faith*. By faith, we mean the revealed truth. God revealed Himself to the Prophets, the Apostles, and the saints. This truth is authentic because it is by Revelation.

Correct faith shows what God is, what man is, what the purpose of man is, and how he can achieve communion with God. When faith is adulterated, life is instantly adulterated; man loses his orientation and is unable to reach his target. What happens is similar to medical science, the curative treatment of a hospital. If the underlying theory about a disease is wrong, the cure is also wrong, implying that such a disease is not cured in this particular hospital. This is why we Orthodox insist on safeguarding Revelation. If it is altered, then our salvation is uncertain.



We should view the decisions of the Ecumenical Councils in this perspective. The teaching that Christ is God is associated with salvation, since only God can save man. If Christ does not have two perfect natures, a divine nature and a human nature, our salvation is impossible. It is the same if God does not have a divine will and a human will. Therefore, our staying within dogmatic precision is a prerequisite of cure, of salvation and sanctification.

The second requirement for the therapy of the soul is *awareness of the illness*. This is necessary, because once we know we are ill we seek a doctor and a cure. Otherwise, we remain in ignorance and illness.

The same holds true of bodily diseases. Ignorance of the disease leads to death. Knowledge of the disease, deriving from pain, prompts us to take all necessary measures to obtain a cure. It is a terrible thing not to know our bodily disease.

One of the greatest sins of our times is self-love and self-sufficiency. We are contained in ourselves, having the illusion that we are well, that we need no doctor. The illusion of health is the worst hypocrisy. Saint John the Evangelist said: "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us" (1 John 1:8).

Obviously, realizing our horrible condition is not easy. Carnal man cannot know his passions. In fact, he thinks that life contrary to nature, as experienced after the Fall, is natural. This is indeed tragic. However, there are certain ways by which man can come to know himself. Let me report some of them.

One may know his condition through the energy of holy Grace. What happens with spiritual diseases is identical to how bodily diseases are detected, by undergoing appropriate examinations, using X-rays and a tomography. The uncreated Grace of God enters our soul, and then we see our horrible distorted state and mess. In the beginning of spiritual life, the vision of the uncreated Light is experienced negatively, that is, as a fire burning the passions.

Another way of self-knowledge is the study of Holy Scripture, of patristic works, of the lives of the saints. By reading these writings, we realize God's love and philanthropy and how far man is able to go by the Grace of God and his own personal struggle. We might also realize our deficiencies and weaknesses.

In this case, study functions as a spiritual mirror. The asceticism of the saints bothers our conscience, it throws our inaction away, it invalidates all excuses and leads us to the observance of Christ's commandments.

We may say that in realizing our illness we are helped by our failures in life. When some of our supports are lifted, when we reach a point of saying, like the Disciples on the road to Emmaus, "But we trusted that it had been he which should have redeemed Israel" (Luke 24:21), then we are able to really see Christ and seek the new life He gives to the world. Personal, family, and social failures bring us to an impasse. At that point, if we have an inner disposition, a spiritual inspiration, associated with hope in God, this may lead us to a realization of our spiritual condition.

Another fine method of comprehending the illnesses of the soul is by exercising logical prayer. When we repeat with our lips and our mind the prayer "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me," the Grace of God will break the outside wall of illusory good self and reveal our wretchedness.

Because God loves us and is interested in our salvation, He keeps sending us invitations so that we do not lose our purpose and destination. He calls one person through Godly despair, someone else by the illumination of the holy Light, a third one through study, a fourth one through his encounter with a holy person who has had the experience of the other life existing in the Church, and through various other means.

The third requirement for our cure is to find a *therapist*. We search for the proper physician for our bodily diseases, and we should do the same for spiritual diseases. For the former we first visit the provincial doctor, then we go to large specialized hospitals, then we consult advanced specialists, and finally, we visit medical school professors and doctors abroad. We should exhibit the same, if not more, fervor for the spiritual diseases tormenting us.

The holy Fathers state in their works that clerics of all degrees are called healers. In many of his sermons, Saint Gregory the Theologian refers to this point and calls the clerics healers because they heal the psychological diseases of the people. He himself asserts that he refused to shepherd the people and, instead, left for the desert after his ordination as a presbyter, because he felt he was unworthy of healing the illnesses of others, not having cured himself yet. It is significant that Saint Gregory calls the work of Christ's divine providence therapeutic work and Christ a therapist of men. He calls the priesthood a therapeutic science and a therapeutic service. He says characteristically: "We are servants and collaborators for this therapy."

The priests' fundamental task is not selling tickets to Paradise, but healing, so that when man sees God He becomes Paradise and not Hell for man. If we examine all the sacraments and sacramental rites available to the priest from Baptism to Holy Communion, and from repentance to the funeral service, we will find out that they all presuppose and aim at man's therapy. The sacraments are not social events and rituals; the church rites do not aim at psychological justification and the cultivation of religious feelings, but at man's therapy. By viewing the sacraments outside the therapy of man's personality, by participating in them without the cleansing of the heart and the illumination of the *nous*, we ignore the deeper purpose of church life.

It is common to hear the excuse that a proper spiritual father for therapy has not been found. My reply is that most of us actually need a nurse and a provincial physician, not refined surgery. We have to begin with the spiritual father close to us, in our parish, in our town. What is indispensable is to open our heart to God, to

freely expose our wounds and request His Grace. If God sees that we need a better and “more scientific” physician, he will reveal him to us. Also, if our spiritual father realizes that we need help from a more experienced spiritual father, because we have advanced in spiritual life and have more subtle spiritual needs, then he will recommend the way. By all means, it is basic to start confessing to someone. We should not waste precious time in searching for an experienced spiritual father. If needed, he will show up in due time.

What we have said is still not sufficient. We also need a fourth way for our inner cure, and this is the finding and implementation of the proper *therapeutic treatment*. In bodily diseases, if one becomes aware of his illness and finds the best doctor, but does not follow the recommended treatment, he fails to be cured, he does not get well. The same is true of spiritual illnesses. Correct faith, awareness of the illness, and a proper therapist are all prerequisites, but if we do not follow the right therapeutic way, if we do not take proper medicine, we cannot be cured.

There are several such ways. Let me point to what is suggested in many hymns of the Church: namely, fasting, vigils, and prayer. I point out this method because in the effort to apply these commandments many things emerge, and we are helped in our spiritual life. By doing these things, we develop mourning, repentance, love for God and our brothers, purity of the heart, and so on. This is why they are very important means for our spiritual therapy.

Fasting aims at the exercise of both soul and body so that they move together in the course to deification. There is both a bodily fast and a spiritual fast. Bodily fast refers to the quality and quantity of food, as determined by the Church. It is scientifically proven that some meals are heavier and others are lighter for the organism. Sometimes it is essential to fast very strictly because in this way man's *nous* is detached from material goods and turns to God. Furthermore, obedience to fasts determined by the Church helps man to submerge his will to the universal will and experience of the Church. Combined with spiritual fasting, bodily fasting introduces man to the atmosphere of cleansing, that is, the struggle to cleanse the heart from the passions of self-indulgence, avarice, boastfulness, and selfishness.

Vigils are an effort to subordinate the body to the soul, in the sense that it does not exceed its functions and its mission. The Church does not share the dualistic view of Hellenistic philosophy, according to which there exist two separate entities, a soul and a body. Vigils, along with all other physical exercises, aim precisely at the unity of soul and body. In any case, a lot of people stay awake for various reasons today. So it is worthy doing this vigil for God, to stay awake for the glory of God. Of course, in the world, vigil is not the all-night prayer of the monks in the

Monasteries, but an exercise against excessive sleep and excessive physical comfort that breed countless evils to man's organism. Vigil is also closely related to the balance of the psychosomatic organism of man and to watchfulness, which is essential in spiritual life.

Prayer is tied to fasting and vigils. Fasting and vigils without prayer are useless. Indeed, if the Holy Spirit does not come, all physical exercises are futile. Prayer is either worshipping, with the entire community, or intelligent, made by man's reason, or noetic-of-the-heart, when the *nous*, in the Holy Spirit, enters man's heart. Then the *nous* and the heart unite in the power and energy of the Holy Spirit, and this is called illumination of the *nous*.

In Church hymns, fasting, vigils, and prayer are called celestial gifts. They assist man in his journey to deification and sanctification. They lead the psychosomatic organism to balance. In Adam there was such a balance before the Fall. The *nous* was inspired by the Grace of God; it nurtured the body and then radiated the Grace to all creation. After the Fall, however, the *nous* was darkened. The body is fed from the creation rather than from the *nous*, and bodily passions show up. The soul is fed from the body, and this creates psychological passions. With fasting, vigils, and prayer these contrary-to-nature functions are corrected. This is why cleansing, illumination, and deification are expressed through these gifts.

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We need therapy. It is not sufficient to be potential members of the Church, we must become actively so. The Orthodox Church possesses a perfect therapeutic system, an excellent therapeutic treatment, so long as we desire to become persons-hypostases.

The whole series can be viewed here: [The Church as a Therapeutic Center](#)

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