
HUMAN SUFFERING AND ITS HEALING

ACCORDING TO JEAN-CLAUDE LARCHET

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Abstract

This research tries to present the approach of the French theologian to suffering. He sees the remedy to suffering in the works of the Holy Fathers, who bring forward not only a historical approach, but also a practical and theological one. As for the issue of disease, it leads to an array of questions. What is the origin of illness? What is the relationship between sin and disease? Why is there still illness on Earth if Christ, upon his arrival, healed all human beings?

Regarding the initial origin of illness, the Holy Fathers remind us that we must specifically look for the source of illness, suffering and death in the personal will of people, in the misuse of freedom, in Adam's sin committed in paradise. Illness and suffering will be eradicated in the Kingdom to come, so all people must live them until then. By Christ's restoration of human nature, they have already gained a different meaning for us, suffering and disease becoming weapons against sin.

Keywords: Jean-Claude Larchet, sin, suffering, illness, mental affection, therapy

1. Job's suffering according to the theologian Jean-Claude Larchet

The Book of Job is one of the most profound and impressive writings on human suffering, an existential book *par excellence*, the complete expression of theological existentialism [1].

One of the fundamental teachings of the Book of Job is that his sufferings are not a punishment for his sins, even if his friends wish to persuade him that God punishes him for his sins, according to His holy justice. Job's friends' thinking reveals the logic and mentality of the Old Testament epoch, according to which God rewards the righteous and punishes the wicked [2].

The friends' ideas and attitude are condemnable from a theological, moral and spiritual point of view. Many commentators have considered Job's wife and friends to be images of Satan; some have even gone further, claiming that, in fact, Job's wife is the devil himself. Instead of trying to relieve their friend's physical, moral and spiritual sufferings, they only increase them, by attempting to make him admit his guilt for what is befalling him, due to the sins he has committed throughout time.

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Saint John Chrysostom, in his commentaries on the Book of Job, shows how God condemns the three friends' attitude and conduct, by giving some examples: "And it came to pass that the Lord said to Eliphaz the Temanite: 'Thou hast sinned, thou and thy friends, for ye have said nothing right in my presence, as my servant Job hath.' God always calls him my servant, wishing to show that all that happened is no more: thus, Job spoke right, when he spoke about his good deeds, while you did not spoke right when you condemned him. And now, He says, take seven bullocks and seven rams, and go look for my servant Job, and he will offer for you burnt offerings. He would not have ordered this, if he had had the Covenant; but it is he who becomes a priest while they bring the offerings; he had offered these offerings for his children, now he is doing it for his friends." [3]

The text shows that Job is not resentful. God takes Job's friends as witnesses to Job's virtue and He also shows the seriousness of their error through the exceptional importance of the offering. Such considerable offerings would not have been necessary if the errors to be made up for had not been so serious. God shows that the offering was insufficient, *for*, He says, if this had not been because of him (that is, if the offering had not been mediated by him), I would not have healed (forgiven) you for your error. By this, he shows that He has forgiven both their errors and themselves. *I would have left you perish*, He says, but for him (his saving intervention). For ye have not spoken right against my servant Job.

The righteous Job does not see God's *immanent justice* as his friends see it, because human suffering is not necessarily a punishment for sin, since many innocent people have suffered. Moreover, Job sees that, quite to the contrary, many wicked people fare well, or even very well. It is perhaps for this reason that the Eastern tradition has not deemed it necessary to establish a direct relation between illness (suffering) and the personal sins of the ailing. The same tradition sees that innocent people, and even the saints, must endure serious illnesses and terrible sufferings, while the sinful spend almost all their lives in perfect health, free from any suffering – a paradox that the Old Testament shows many times, especially in the Book of Job [4].

Nevertheless, throughout the book, Job seems to suffer for his trespasses; however, he refuses to identify his sufferings with his sins. In spite of his friends and their erudite thinking, he protests, arguing for his innocence, even daring to call upon God, so that, eventually, justice is granted to him. His suffering is related to the issue of retribution. He is afflicted by troubles, but is unable to find a cause for his suffering. His despair is unexplained and inexplicable. The Book of Job ends with the much-awaited intervention of God, but he does not receive a theoretical (rational) answer regarding the origin of his suffering.

Further on in the book, Job is stricken by an illness that crushes his body and soul. According to Orthodox Judaism, his sudden suffering has a reason: the extraordinarily serious sin committed by someone claiming to be God's servant. Job rebels against this deduction, estimating that there is no equivalence between his trespasses and the events happening to him. He does not doubt either God or

His justice; he cannot admit that God is unjust even for one second; however, ultimately he strongly believes in his own righteousness, so much so that he is utterly unable to understand his misfortune, and ignorance pushes him to despair [5].

The Book of Job reveals the mean and envious works of the devil, which brings many of the evils and sufferings of this world. It clearly shows that there is no obligatory connection between the sufferings endured by people in this life and their sins. The book provides a justification for disconnecting guilt and suffering; yet, at the same time, Job can be an exception to the rule, like the man blind from his birth in the Gospels. Job's uprightness makes him a model and, according to the book, this is also the reason for his suffering. Drawing a parallel between Job and the man blind from his birth, J.L.A. Garcia claims that, in the latter's case, Jesus denied explicitly that human suffering is caused by the parents' sin [6]. When Jesus was asked who had sinned, the man or his parents, he replied: neither the man, nor his parents, but the Lord's works are manifest in him; similarly, Job did not suffer because of his or his parents' sins.

Although this text has encouraged Christians to dismiss a relation between sin and suffering much too easily, its meaning is much more profound. It can be said that Jesus rejected the assumption that our sins cause our suffering, usually or very often. The main idea that the two biblical episodes illustrate is that suffering, both Job's and the blind man's, was not caused by sin, but was allowed by God, to enable the occurrence of a miracle. However, as a last remark, we would like to underline that not all Christ's miraculous healings can be given the same explanation.

At the end of the book, God shows Himself as a Giver of goodness and restores Job, restoring him his initial wealth.

2. The theology of illness according to Jean-Claude Larchet

According to Jean-Claude Larchet, the subject of illness raises several essential questions: What is the origin of illness? What is the relation between sin and illness? Why does illness still exist, if Christ has come and healed human nature?

Regarding the origin of illness, the Holy Fathers remind us that the source of illness, suffering and death lies only in human personal will, in misuse of liberty, in Adam's sin in Paradise. Illnesses and infirmities originate in sin, because it is due to the first humans' disobedience that we received the clothes of skin of our sickness-prone body and we were afflicted with sufferings. Our first parents, listening to the evil one's suggestion, wished to be gods without God and lost their grace, which granted them a certain supernatural condition [7].

Christ is an exception to this rule, because He did not automatically suffer the effects of the original sin, which all people inherit through their birth. Instead, he willingly took upon Himself the suffering feature, yet without the inclination to sin. Without Christ, suffering has no meaning, has no value. It is

only when suffering is placed in God's hands that it may have meaning and value [8].

Jean-Claude Larchet divides illnesses into three categories: physical, mental and spiritual.

3. Physical illnesses

Physical health corresponds to the original and natural state of human nature and may be considered a good thing in itself. On the other hand, however, physical health does not help at all and is not truly good if it is not used well, that is, if it does not serve the good, through obedience and fulfillment of Christ's commandments. In some cases, from a spiritual perspective, illness can be considered, paradoxically, a greater good than health, to the extent to which people use it wisely and can consequently receive spiritual fruit.

As a science, medicine has tried to reach perfect objectivity, striving to reduce subjective factors as much as possible. As a result, the psychological and spiritual dimensions of the ailing have been eliminated from classical medicine, and are taken into account only in alternative medicine or psychotherapy, which do not properly belong to medicine. We can see that official medicine has reduced patients to their bodies and illnesses, treating them as mere objects. Consequently, many ill people turn to alternative medicine, because it considers and treats them personally, with an interest in their personal sufferings and needs.

4. Mental illnesses

Regarding mental illnesses, it is interesting to note the complexity of the old Christian thinking. This type of illnesses can have three causes: organic, demonic and spiritual. Larchet mentions the necessity to revisit an idea which is quite common amongst historians, namely that Christianity sees insanity and mental illness only as the effects of demonic possession. It can be seen from *The Basis of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church* that the latter regards mental illness as a manifestation of the general damage inflicted on human nature by sin. The Holy Fathers made a distinction between illnesses developed *by nature* and those caused by demonic work or passions. According to this distinction, it is equally unjustifiable either to consider all mental illnesses as demonic manifestations, which would imply carrying out the exorcism service indiscriminately, or to treat all spiritual disorders by clinical methods [9].

4.1. The somatic origin of insanity

The Holy Fathers admit that some forms of insanity have a physiological origin, thus concurring with the medical theories of their age. Mental disorders caused by physiological affections are not disorders of the soul itself, but of its expression and manifestation through the body. Beyond these apparent

disorders, the soul itself is not affected and its essence remains intact. The distinction made by the Holy Fathers is completely different from an apparent distinction between the spirit (mind) and the soul. When disorders occur in the soul, they do not leave the spirit unharmed, but affect it in its entirety. Therefore, mental disorders are not disorders of the soul, even if they seem to be. Insanity, which, in some of its forms, lends its name to these disorders, in this case is not an illness of the soul, but of the body [10].

4.2. The demonic origin of insanity

Quoting the Holy Fathers, Larchet emphasizes yet another cause of insanity, the demonic one, which can even reach complete demonic possession. In the Gospels, we find an obviously demonic case of insanity, that of the possessed person in the country of the Gergesenes. Many other similar cases are reported in the lives of the saints, which make it clear that this insanity is caused by demonic work. For a general image of it, we can notice that most often we deal with forms of agitation or violent insanity, or, on the contrary, forms of depression accompanied by atony or even catatonia.

It can be said that passions, as long as they exist in a human being, are a form of demonic possession, to varying degrees. Some Fathers think that the seven demons mentioned in the Gospel according to Matthew, as well as the seven demons cast out of Mary Magdalene, are a reference to the seven main passions. We do not know the criteria according to which some people become possessed, and others do not; similarly, we cannot explain why, under the same circumstances, an illness affects one person, but not another. The devil works in this manner in some people for reasons which are not always clear; however, irrespective of the cause for which people become victims of demonic works, God will not deprive them of His help and will put a limit to the evil spirits' fierceness. The antidote to evil spirits and demonic insanity is the grace of the Holy Spirit, which every person receives through the Holy Mystery of Baptism [10, p. 79].

4.3. The spiritual origin of insanity

The third category of illnesses has spiritual causes and is related to people's free will. Even if demonic work and free will are sometimes involved in the first two kinds of insanity (somatic and demonic), mental illnesses correspond, at the level of the psyche, to a disorder similar to that represented by organic illnesses at the physical level.

Many of the disorders which at present are deemed to be merely mental are seen by the Holy Fathers as belonging to the spiritual level. The differences between patristic nosography and present-day psychiatric nosography prevent establishment of precise connections. Consequently, even currently there are differences between various schools and countries regarding the classification and definition of mental illnesses, and similarities are to be found by symptoms,

rather than by syndromes. There is a certain terminological correspondence between classical nosography disorders and those in patristic nosography, for instance: Freud's narcissism is related to philautia, passionate self-love; anxiety and uneasiness can be related to the passions of fear and sadness; aggressiveness, to the passion of anger; asthenia corresponds to a facet of akedia; phobias can be related to the passion of fear; melancholy psychosis can be linked to akedia, but also to sadness, reaching an extreme form in despair. It can be noticed that there is a strong connection between the various forms of depression, akedia and sadness, which has been remarked by some psychiatrists [10, p. 124-125].

5. Spiritual illnesses

According to the Holy Fathers, spiritual health is related to the ideal human nature which Adam had before his fall, and which he had to bring to perfection, through the cooperation between his free will and divine grace. Human spiritual health started to deteriorate because of the original sin. The Holy Fathers call this fallen state insanity or illness. Insanity and illness occur in relation to various human faculties (mind, reason, will, imagination, memory), which are misused or, more precisely, become perverted due to their unnatural use. In fact, these are the passions, whose number has been established at eight, for practical reasons, by Evagrius Ponticus. His list, which has become the norm in the Orthodox tradition, includes: gluttony, fornication, avarice, sadness, akedia, anger, vainglory and pride [11].

Passions are considered spiritual illnesses because they are born out of perversion, out of the non-rational use of the faculties and inclinations which originally and naturally tended to God. According to the Holy Fathers, evil and sin are always defined by relation to normal human nature, to our duty of being theanthropic.

The healing of spiritual illnesses is based on divine grace, fully given to human nature by Jesus Christ. Human beings receive this divine grace fully through the three initiation Mysteries, so that the salvation and healing work is completed by the cooperation between the divine grace bestowed by the Holy Ghost and the Christians' personal striving. Spiritual conversion is effected through uprooting the passions, which are spiritual illnesses, and acquiring the virtues, which bring people back to original health. Spiritual healing is essentially related to what the Eastern Fathers call "praxis", which expresses, strictly speaking, ascetic endeavours.

The goal of spiritual illness therapy is spiritual health and salvation. This therapy is not related only to one's having a spiritual father, but is placed within an entire context of ascetic and church life. Through this ascetic and church living, and through their efforts of putting into practice the counsels of their spiritual fathers, the sick participate in their own healing [12].

6. Conclusions

The teaching of the Book of Job emphasises that he did not suffer because of his sins, but because of his righteousness, which attracted Satan's power upon him. Suffering is presented as temptation, which Job defeats by his virtues and with God's help. Job calls, waits for and heralds Christ, so that he becomes His prefiguration.

For people, suffering remains a potential, so that it is only at the Second Coming that human nature will acquire the new way of being, which was received in the person of Christ. The entrance into the Kingdom of Heaven will mean the ultimate end of suffering. Christ changed the meaning of suffering, of corruption and death, since they used to be means of domination and destruction serving sin and they became means to salvation and eternal life.

Illness can be relieved or even healed through Christian therapy because the latter is based on the uncreated divine energies sent by Christ, which are bestowed on the entire human nature, redeemed and assumed in His Person. The Incarnate Logos heals the entire human nature from suffering, illness and sin, deifying it, so that it may succeed in seeing the Living God.

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