

## EDITORIAL

### *Are any among you sick? (James 5.14)*

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Pain, illness and suffering – either physical or psychological – are part of the history of mankind and of each person in particular. There is no man who does not know joy in his existence, and in the same way, there is no man who does not know suffering. This is the reason why suffering is an existential problem and man is still seeking for a satisfying solution to it.

Such an answer was sought by the participants in the international symposium *'The Human Condition between Suffering and God's Love. Disease Therapy and Palliative Care'*, organised in the period 4-6 May 2012 by the Faculty of Orthodox Theology, The Doctoral Theology School, The Centre for Inter-Religious Studies and Christian Psycho-Pedagogy at the '1 Decembrie 1918' University in Alba Iulia.

Reaching its 11<sup>th</sup> edition, the International Symposium of the Faculty of Orthodox Theology in Alba Iulia gathered more than 80 theologians, professors, researchers, physicians and persons in high positions from public and private institutions that are involved in the work of alleviating suffering. The theme was chosen in accordance with the decision of the Holy Synod of the Romanian Orthodox Church which declared 2012 'Homage Year of Holy Unction and Looking after the Sick'. This decision was meant to urge the scientific and theological world to analyse a theme of such great importance to the contemporary man, who no longer understands suffering and illness as a form of divine pedagogy or as an alembic for the distillation of virtues. Therefore, the theological perspective on suffering – complementary and necessary – comes to investigate a field which is foreign to the unfaithful man, but friendly and familiar to the one who lives his existence not only in the material dimension of the world. Consequently, the majority of the papers presented (focused, as it was natural, on the problem of suffering and its solution in a liturgical framework) have tried to identify the roots of pain and possible answers that man can find to this problem, in mankind's sacred books, in the patristic and scientific literature, as well as in practice.

The participants, mostly theologians, but also physicians or philosophers from Romania or abroad have put forward their opinions and the results of their research and analyses on this theme. In the discussions, the most frequent questions seeking an answer were: Why does God allow suffering? Which should man's answer be to such a challenge? Should pain be suppressed and in what way? Is euthanasia an answer to the problem of prolonged suffering? Throughout the centuries, Christianity has tried to offer several answers to these questions, but today, more than ever, the faithful man must understand that

physical suffering – despite the fact that it can be overcome with the support of techniques, instruments and medication – must be regarded and assumed as a measure through which God contributes to our amendment.

Evil – pain, illness and ultimately, death – is not a reality in itself, it is not an ontological reality, but in accordance with the thinking of the Holy Fathers, it is a lack of good (Saint Athanasius, Saint Basil the Great) or an accident (Saint Dionysius the Areopagite), and eventually, it originates in our own choices (the free will). We suffer because we use our liberty in erroneous choices that afterwards turn against us: Adam chose not to obey, which made him suffering and mortal. Putting on the garments of sin, *the garments of skin* (Genesis 3.21), he became impervious to the divine and deifying grace, with a gloomy face, a being full of sadness, slavery and suffering. Yet God, in His great mercifulness converted suffering in a remedy of divine pedagogy which has a purifying and healing role. The ontological opacity of human suffering could be annihilated only through its complete assumption in the New Adam. Therefore, God became a man, so that the abyss of suffering, from Adam until the end of time, should be defeated through the Passion, the death on the Cross and the divine Resurrection. Consequently, the whole patristic literature calls sufferings and afflictions ‘trials’. The trials, afflictions and sufferings we face are commensurate to our capacity of endurance, which – by virtue of providence, increases as we advance in pain (Abba Dorotheos). Whether they are short or long, just or not, the sufferings we endure in life are our moral test through which God verifies the extent to which we have acquired the measure of holiness. Thus, the narrow gate (Matthew 7.14) that leads to eternal happiness usually involves sufferings, but only understanding their meaning can we accept them with serenity and only understanding their value can we turn pain into a sign of divine love.

From the perspective of the Christian-Orthodox theology, evil also has a meaning with a positive connotation: through the battle with evil, the Christian regains the positivity of the Adamic state. The ascetical tension involves a victory over the negativity of creation and especially over the human being, and the assertion of good as existential form is the condition for recovering the paradisiacal ontos, for reacquiring the state of *son of God*. This is the reason why the Orthodox conception is not dichotomist, but complementary, seeking a pedagogy towards Christ in any element or phenomenon of life.

Many of the Church Fathers (Maximus the Confessor, Mark the Ascetic, Isaac the Syrian, Nikita Stethatos, etc.), but also contemporary Christian writers (J.C. Larchet, C.S. Lewis) mention a ‘theology of illness’, a ‘theology of grief’, name which denotes that man must look for the deeper meaning of suffering, not limit himself to the purely formal aspect of physical pain, which is only effect, not cause of the illness (J. Meyendorff).

However, the problem of suffering does not concern only the sick person, but also the people close to him, who, often suffer with him. As people, we cannot remain insensitive to the pain of our fellow creature (Job 6.14) and hence we try to alleviate his suffering; with a word, with a prayer...these are only a few ways of comforting him. Actually, we continue the work of the Lord Jesus

Christ. He did not remain insensitive to pain, but being concerned with the pain and distress of his contemporaries, He performed innumerable healings, through which he tried to alleviate suffering. This is the reason why in the eucharistical texts He was called ‘physician of bodies and souls’.

Equally, the Holy Apostles were the followers of this way of approaching suffering, urging their successors – the priests – to seek the salvation of the sick through prayer, confession and anointment with a special oil (brought ‘*in the name of the Lord*’): “*Are any among you sick? Let them call for the presbyters of the Church: they should pray over them and anoint them with oil in the Name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will heal those who are sick and the Lord will raise them up. If they have committed sins, they will be forgiven. Confess your offenses to one another in order to be healed. The insistent prayer of a righteous person is powerfully effective*” (James 5.13-16).

Throughout the centuries, this simple anointing of the sick with oil blessed by the prayer of the priests developed into a complex ritual, a long and exhausting prayer developed until the 14<sup>th</sup> century to seven days and was connected to the Mystery of Confession and of the Eucharist. This ritual, included both by the Orthodox and the Roman-Catholic Church in the seven Mysteries, was the way through which the Church answered the concrete cases of suffering.

These are only a few of the issues analysed in the discussions and presentations of the International Symposium in Alba Iulia. The presentations, studies and materials presented were published in the extended conference book, which numbered more than 1000 pages (82 items).

We present a selection of these works, annotated and mended, as a consequence of the discussions. We hope for this volume to add to the theological and scientific knowledge referring to the issue of pain, suffering and its alleviation, especially from a spiritual perspective.

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