

HEALING AND CURING: TWO ASPECTS OF THERAPEUTIC SPIRITUALITY AND THE SACRAMENT OF HOLY UNCTION

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One of the most pressing concerns of the modern age arises from the shortcomings created by the preoccupation with short term solutions to deep-rooted, enduring problems. The obsession of finding fast track solutions, which lead to instant gratification is attached to another fixation of the modern age, the one that does not have the patience to look beyond quick fixes and rapidly acquired riches.

This outlook has also influenced our approach to therapy. Instead of viewing therapy as the restoration of the human organism to a balanced constitution, we are trying to suspend the symptoms by attacking them through a technical process which will provide a cure and will fix the problem brought about by a malfunction in the mechanical constitution of the organism. To be precise, the cure aims at repairing the ailing body part by restoring to it the vital functions that it is supposed to perform. Therapy is substituted by cure, and specifically by repair work to anatomical parts of the body that have been temporarily put out of order.

What is interesting to note regarding this attitude *vis-à-vis* illness and cure is that the method for dealing with disease and therapy is similar to the one adopted by the governments in their dealings with health care or 'medicare' policies. Health, singled out not as the health of the concrete person, but as an abstract notion defined by the general term 'public health', by being subordinate to a government department administered under a Ministry, is thoroughly institutionalized; thus, the services that it offers to the public, the cure to the ailment, is viewed as a packaged product, which in turn is used as a criterion to measure the efficacy of the institution.

Administered under these conditions, the modern context of therapy is deprived of any interpersonal relations that may develop over a long term relationship of the care giver with the care receiver and it bears no relation to what was ministered as a therapeutic method in the past. What is offered today as therapy amounts to nothing more than an impersonal tune up coming with a limited warranty accompanied by an expiry date.

In the therapeutic centers of antiquity it was not unusual for the period of incubation to last several months. The visitors or pilgrims to these cultic centers would congregate in large colonnaded halls and plenty of water would be offered to them, while the priest attendants in the service of Asclepius or Amphiaraos provided continuous care during the patients' incubating period. The therapy to be followed consisted in a combination of prayer, cultic practices, inducement to dreams interpreted as divine visions, exercise, diet, readings and lectures. Eryximachos, a physician in Socrates's entourage described the art of medicine in *Symposium*, in clearly philosophical terms, by stating that «medicine may be regarded generally as the knowledge of the loves and desires of the body... and the best physician is he who is able to separate fair love from foul», implying that foul loves of the body, or passions, create imbalance and lead to illness. In the context of the philosophical discussion developed in *Symposium*, true or fair love, the domain of the sublime god Eros, clearly distinguished from foul love, is the man's greatest friend, who brings about health in the human organism, «since of all the gods he is the best friend of men, the helper and the healer of the ill, *qew`n filanqrwpovtato~ ejpivokourov~ te w]n tw`n ajnqrwvopwn kai; ijatro;~ touvtwn...» (189d).*

In this context one may be in a better position to grasp the initial meaning of therapy as a gift brought about not by governmental policies, but by fair love. If we turn our attention to another Platonic dialogue, *Euthyphro*, we have an even clearer perception of therapy rendered as a service. Socrates states that «medicine is also a sort of ministration or service, having in view the attainment of some object – would you not say of health?» (13d). The term used for service in Greek is *u]phretikhv*. This is also the initial meaning of *qerapeiva*, or the verb *qerapeuvw*, rendered as “to serve”, which may also be used as a synonym to ministry, *diakoniva*. By rendering cultic service to a god, by serving the specific healing god as his *therapon*, the servant practices healing as a ministry.

In the syncretic civilization of the Hellenistic period, especially in its middle eastern parts, therapy begins to acquire a larger meaning than the one associated with service. This is mainly due to the influence exerted by Stoicism; several notable Stoics, among them Posidonius and Chrysippus, composed treatises *On passions*. Increasingly, the passions, now linked to

disorders of the soul, begin to play an important role in the onset of illness. They are explained as an excessive impulse contrary to reason, to *logos* according to nature, or as a movement of the soul which is irrational and contrary to nature, *κivnhsi~ yuch`~ a[logo~, para; fuvsin... to; "para; fuvsin" ... sumbaiononto~ para; to;n ojrqo;n kai; kata; fuvsin lovgon. Pavnte~ d joi] ejn toi`~ pavqesin o[nte~ ajpostrevfontai to;n lovgon.* (Stobaeus in *Hel. Phil.* p. 404). The passions originate in the soul and they result in psychological disorders, which develop into bodily ailments. They go against the principle of *orthos logos*.

According to the Stoics there are four categories of passions, viewed also as vices, - *luvph, fovbo~, ejpiqumiva, h]donhv*, juxtaposed to the four corresponding Platonic virtues of prudence, courage, temperance and justice, *frovnhsi~, ajndreiva, swfrosuvnh, dikaiosuvnh*. Later on, the enriched variation of vices contributing to the person's imbalanced state of soul, which eventually leads to all kinds of spiritual and bodily disorders, will be elaborated out of these principal categories. Compared to what we will encounter later in saint John of Damascus in his *Sacra Parallela*, where he enumerates 31 virtues originating from the four Platonic virtues to which are added the three Pauline ones forming the virtues of the soul, *psychikai*, and the 25 virtues originating in the body, *somatikai*, to which correspond 49 passions of the soul and 46 of the body, the above list of Stobaeus seems quite modest, but worth mentioning in order to grasp the Stoic background in the history of the evolution of the virtues as therapeutic correctives and of the vices as ailments of the soul. Stobaeus explains that the following passions

are classified under appetite: anger and its species... intense sexual desires, cravings and yearnings, love of pleasures and riches and honours and the like. Under pleasure: rejoicing at another's misfortunes, self-gratification, trickery and the like. Under fear: hesitancy, anguish, astonishment, shame, confusion, superstition, dread, and terror. Under distress: malice, envy, jealousy, pity, grief, worry, sorrow, annoyance, mental pain, vexation. (*Hel. Phil.* p. 412).

We cannot dwell any longer in this classification here; suffice it to say that the

cultivation of these individual passions taking the form of sexual desires, the pursuit of pleasure and riches and the rest are all consequential to the quest of individual interests and they are telltale signs of a way of life that is cut off from the fellowship afforded by society, with all the attendant consequences ensuing from such self centered motivations. The cultivation of passions is a direct threat to the community, it undermines the social fabric of human fellowship. Therapy restores the person back to the community. It is in this way that the therapeutic method is dispensed by the healing gods as a restorative gift offered to humanity.

From the treatise on the *Sacred Disease* of the Hippocratic collection we know that all diseases are both human and divine; this implies that the restorative therapies are also human and divine, arising from the synergy of the healers with the gods. However, it is also important to stress that for the Asclepiads and the Hippocratic healers the passions, *pathi*, are affections of the body, manifested as bodily and in no way as psychological ailments. For the Stoics, the passions of sorrow, fear, desire and pleasure are pathological states of the soul, psychological disorders from which the virtuous and wise man must be released so that he may attain freedom from passions, imperturbability or passionlessness, *apatheia*. The man of virtue, the *spoudaios* or the philosopher becomes a physician of the soul. Galen is also indebted to the Stoics for his understanding of passions, as they are expounded in his work with the telling title “On the diagnosis and therapy of the passions dwelling in each soul” (*Peri; diagnwsew~ kai; qerapeiva~ tw`n ejn th`l eJkavsth/ yuch`l ijdivwn paqw`n*). A contemporary of Galen, Alexander of Aphrodisias describes the onset of disease in aretalogical fashion, stating that as far as virtue is removed from vice, so is bad health from good health, and just as good health is according to nature and innate, so is bad health against nature, acquired and extraneous to it.¹

The personal passions, the vices enumerated by Stobaeus are similar in scope and terminology to those enumerated by Saint Paul in his Epistles to Galatians (5. 16-23), Colossians (3. 5, 8, 12) and Philippians (4. 8). The

¹ Alexandri Aphrodisiensis, “De febris libellus” in I. L. Ideler, *Physici et medici Graeci minores*, vol. I, ajnatuwpwsh, Adolf. M. Hakkert, Amsterdam, 1963, sel. 86-87: «wJ~ ga;r ajreth; pro;~ kakivan, ou{tw~ eujkrasiva pro;~ duskrasivan... To; ga;r e[mfuton qermo;n h] eu[kraton tw`/ para; fuvsin qermw`/, kaqavper a[krw/ mevson, ajntivkeitai, kai; ejnantiva hJ e[mfuto~ qevrmh th`/ para; fuvsin qermovthti, kaqavper ajreth`/ kakiva...»

Apostle does not only enumerate the vices by qualifying them as “works of the flesh”, but by addressing himself to a community of Christians living in Galatia or in Philippi, he is warning them of the dangers brought about by an individualistic way of life lived outside of the community; at the same time he is proposing a therapeutic method by contrasting the “works of the flesh” with the “fruits of the Spirit”, the latter acting as beneficial virtues offsetting the corresponding vices. It should also be stressed that illnesses resulting from the works of the flesh, that is, physiological in nature can be healed by the “fruits of the Spirit”, not merely by spiritual intervention worked out by the spiritual powers of man, but by the works of the Holy Spirit of the Trinity, the presence and the healing power of which can only be sought within the ecclesiastical and eucharistic community of the specific Church in Philippi, in Corinth, in Rome or wherever the Church happens to be. Thus the restoration of the individual to the community implies the therapy of the whole community. The Holy Spirit, the Comforter, the Spirit of truth abides in the restored body of the Christians by healing and cleansing that body from every impurity of the works of the flesh.

John of Damascus proposes also a similar method by contrasting each vice to its corresponding virtue (*Ilera; paravllhla*, Migne PG 95), but in all fairness to the great Father of the Church, there is not a single instance where he suggests the integration of the ailing person into the ecclesiastical community. In his treatise *Of the eight Spirits of Malice* (Migne PG 95, 80-98), he repeats the same observations on the eight vices analyzed by his predecessor Evagrius Ponticos in his work bearing the same title, *Peri; tw`n ojktw; pneumatwn th`~ ponhriva`~* (Migne PG 40, 1271 ff.). His conclusions point to a therapeutic method of which the end is union with God through the cleansing of the soul by the purifying energy of the virtues which permits its practitioner to approach God intelligibly. It is especially through the cultivation of the virtues of the soul that one may come closer to God – *ta;~ ajreta;~ dhlonovti kai; ma`llon ta;~ yucika;~ di jw`n kai; tw`/ Qew`/ ejggivzomen; it is through the study of virtue that one approaches God and it is through its practice that one elevates the mind to the contemplation, the *theoria* of the Creator – *makavrio` oJ ajreth;n zhtw`n, kai; tauvthn metiwn:n kai; ofti tiv ejstin ajreth; ejpimelw`~ ejreunw`n, wJ~ di jaujth`~ ejggivzwn tw`>/ Qew`/ kai; touvtw/ noerw`~ sugginovmeno`... dia; praktikh`~ ajreth`~ pro;~**

qewrivan ajnavgesqai tou` poihsanto~ (Migne PG 95, 96CD). That this constitutes a therapeutic method for the healing of the soul is clearly suggested in his Platonic analysis of the tripartite division of the soul.

Both Stoicism and sophiological writings influenced profoundly the communities of hellenizing Jews congregating in Alexandria. A great emphasis was given to the cultivation of virtues as therapeutic antidotes to vices, increasingly viewed as representing a healing method which helped its adepts to overcome personal moral defects rather than instilling a spirit of reintegration into the community. Even when Philo attributes to God the therapeutic qualities of virtues in healing the soul, he does so in purely philosophical terms by linking them to divine *logos* or to divine *ennoia* : «For if a thought of God come into the mind, He forthwith blesses it and heals all its sickness» (*Leg. All.* III, 215), provided that the human *logos* triumphs over the passions. By perceiving so many analogies between the human *logos* of the *logikos anthropos* elevating itself to the realm of divine *logos* in order to heal itself from its passions so it may contemplate in divine *theoria* the incorruptible divine *logos*, one may also recognize the debt of the Alexandrian school, represented by Origen and by Clement of Alexandria, to their pagan and Jewish predecessors.

Stoicism had a lasting influence in shaping the wisdom writings of the Old Testament, especially the one known as *4 Maccabees*. The latter simply repeats the four Platonic virtues mentioned already in the book of the *Wisdom of Solomon* as primordial for attaining wisdom, since «nothing in life is more profitable for men than these» (8. 7). If one reads *4 Maccabees* in the light of what has been expounded above concerning the classification of the passions and the role that the reason, *orthos logismos* is called to play in the eradication of the symptoms of the ailments affecting the soul, as well as the important part assigned to the four cardinal virtues, one is confronted with the subsequent entire aretalogical tradition of Christianity. «Our inquiry», states the author of *4 Maccabees* «is whether reason, *orthos logismos*, is sovereign over the passions... Now reason is the mind that with sound logic prefers the life of wisdom... the kinds of wisdom are prudence, justice, courage, and temperance.» (*4 Macc.*, 1. 13, 15-16, 18, 24). In true Stoic tradition *4 Maccabees* continues with the analysis of the passions deriving from desire in their bodily aspects, *somatikai*, and as afflictions of the soul, *psychikai* (1. 26-35).

One may clearly perceive that this tradition of aretology forms a distinct school of therapeutic spirituality running parallel to the sacramental reality of the ecclesiastical community grounded in the therapeutic actuality of the Sacraments which are forming the core beliefs of its existence. What mainly distinguishes the therapeutic spirituality from the sacramental reality of the Church is the particular persistence of the former in forming its own brand of introspective spirituality, independently of the sacramental spirituality which can only be manifested through the works of the Holy Spirit.

This particular persistence of the school of therapeutic spirituality to mould its own tradition is mainly preserved in the writings of monastic spirituality, especially in the works of Evagrius of Pontos, Dorotheos of Gaza, Macarios of Egypt and in the correspondence between John and Barsanouphios. Their analysis of the passions of the soul and body, of the four cardinal virtues, of the psychological states of the person on the way to perfection, of the therapeutic method to be applied for victory over the passions, of the role assigned to the elder as spiritual healer is reminiscent of the Stoic doctrine of the emotive states of the soul, and the corresponding role assigned to the philosopher as healer of passions and as physician of the soul. Just as the Stoics transposed the medical language of the Asclepiads and transformed the Hippocratic pathology of the body into a pathology of the soul, so the desert fathers relied heavily on Stoic philosophy and psychology and applied to their interpretation of the emotive states of the soul the Jewish method of midrashic allegorization. Important healing terms, some of them with strong medical resonance, such as *apatheia*, *anaesthesia*, *ataraxia*, *kata physin zein*, *enkratia*, are therapeutic terms borrowed from Stoicism. The imprint of demonic impressions and imaginings dwelling in the mind are invariably described in the Stoic terms of *typosis* and *phantasia*².

In these works of monastic spirituality very rarely would one find a therapeutic admonition exhorting the sinner to heal his or her soul and body by participating in the Holy Sacraments of the Church, by receiving the healing grace of the Holy Unction, of Confession or of the Holy Eucharist. The Church dispenses these sacraments as the seal of the gift of

² On *typosis*, *phantasia* and *logismos*, see the second chapter of the “Chapters concerning the discernment of passions” of Evagrius of Pontos in the first volume of the *Philocalia*.

the Holy Spirit. She reserves them for those who are called to *metanoia*, for those who are willing to undergo a change of heart and mind; in a real sense, she dispenses them to all those who desire ardently to exchange their previous condition of self-centered existence and self gratification with a way of life based on the relationship with the other, a way of being which transcends their self sufficient autonomy by the introduction of the other in their life as a defining component of their existence. The ones who are called to *metanoia*, to this change of heart, are those whose condition is likened by Christ to sickness and they are in need of a physician (*Mt.* 9. 12, *Mar.* 2. 17, *Lu.* 5. 32).

Given that the life of the Church flows through her sacraments, it is by our participation in the sacraments that we heal our body and soul by receiving baptism, by water and Spirit as medicine for healing, *favrmaka pro;~ qerapeivan* (Gregory of Nyssa, *On Christ's Baptism*, Migne PG 46. 581), and the Holy Eucharist which unites us in an organic way to the life of Christ, as a medicine for life for the healing of all illness, *favrmakon zwh`~... eij~ qerapeivan panto;~ noshvmato~* (Serapion of Thmuis, *Euchologion* 13. 15). Saint Basil writes frequently about the healing power of confession as a way of reintegrating the sinner to the community. Besides the sacraments of baptism, confession and eucharist, the Church upholds another sacrament as particularly therapeutic, the Holy Unction, *Euchelaion*, the Prayer of the Oil, or simply the Prayer of the Faith, *Euchi Pisteos*, as it was known in the ancient Church.

We can only stress one aspect of this sacrament, which has been a cause for misrepresenting it as a healing rite. The understanding of the sacrament as a gift of the Holy Spirit is erroneously interpreted as the active manifestation of the life of the Spirit in the individual who is possessing it as a virtue. Saint Augustine had identified the Holy Spirit and the gift of the Holy Unction with *Caritas*, the virtue of charity (*In epistolam Joannis ad Parthos*, Migne PL 35, 2004). In the medieval iconography of the virtues *Caritas* is frequently identified with *Unctio*. On the cover of the Bible of Floreffe the three Pauline virtues are represented

by banderoles bearing the designations «Faith is the foundation of the hearts. Hope erects (lifts them up). Unction cleanses (them).³»

It is the misinterpretation of this sacrament in particular and the general interpretation, not to say identification, of the seven sacraments with the seven virtues that caused the misunderstanding of the sacramental life of the Church as the personal accomplishment of the individual, who is cleansing himself by the purifying energy of the virtues, so that he may be able to elevate his thoughts noetically, *noerw`~*, by means of the contemplation of God. Gregory the Great emphasized this clearly in his *Moralia* (I. 27), when he stated that the seven virtues are «raised up in us by the Holy Spirit through the conception of right thinking», which does not differ much from what Philo had already asserted when he attributed the healing of the soul to God, specifically to thinking permeated by the *ennoia theou* (*Allegorical Interpretation*, III, 215) or to what was put forth by Saint John of Damascus when he stated that it is through the study of virtue that one approaches God and it is through its practice that one elevates the mind *noerw`~*, to the contemplation of the Creator.

The exclusion of the sacraments from the liturgy, their classification as seven and their subsequent identification with the seven virtues had shifted the emphasis from their sacramental nature to their spiritual efficacy as technical means through which the person who practised them cleansed his soul in order to achieve a spiritual communion with God. Thus, virtues and the individual who applied them to his life, began to reclaim the therapeutic qualities which were inherent in the sacramental life of the ecclesiastical community. The individual efforts and spiritual struggles of the person, together with his relentless pursuit of virtues and his strife against the passions, came to be regarded as the only therapeutic means through which he could purify and heal his soul from sin. Contemplation, introspection, spirituality and the virtuous life used as therapeutic means replaced entirely the healing power of the medicine of the sacraments.

Given the reality of this historical process with regard to therapeutic spirituality and in the context of pastoral health care, how can we recover

³ «Corda fides fundat. Spes erigit. Unctio mundat.» Anne-Marie Bouché, “The Floreffe Bible Frontispiece”, in *Virtue and Vice*, edited by Colum Hourihane, Princeton University Press, 2000, p. 47.

in our day the initial understanding of the sacraments as gifts of the Holy Spirit through which we unite ourselves to the Body of Christ. As pastoral guides, how can we impart to the person who is ailing, a correct understanding of spiritual therapy through the sacraments of Confession, Holy unction and Eucharist, so that he or she may understand the true value of reconciliation and communion with God and men? How can we shift the emphasis from the common understanding of spirituality as individual struggle with the passions and release the patient from the unnecessary burden of the demands placed on his or her conscience for attaining a profound depth of contemplative spirituality, especially when time is running short and he or she must face the critical phase of preparation for the departure from this life? How can we introduce a critically ill person to the realities of the sacramental life and the ecclesiastical community when in most cases, we have to make do with inadequate previous exposure to the sacraments and to the life of the Church?

We have all come across these difficult questions in the ministration of our pastoral duties. If we are inspired by the authentic spirit of our ecclesiastical tradition it is never too late to assist those who are requesting our help to direct their efforts in the recovery of the healing power of the Sacraments. Instead of viewing the sacrament as a personal medicine of immortality, we must work to reorient their comprehension of the sacrament in its true expression as a communal therapeutic medicine that is offered to all those who are surrounding them with their nurturing love. In this way, by their integration in the close community through the sacrament, those who are departing from this life may realize that by their common membership to the Body of Christ, they, together with the caring community that surrounds them, find healing in this communal Cup from which flows abundantly Life eternal.