



**The spiritual meaning of illness-theological and psychological perspective  
(Sensul spiritual al bolii- viziune teologică și psihologică)**

**PhD. Claudia Vlaicu**

Faculty of Theology and Sciences of Education of the  
Valahia University of Târgoviște,  
ROMANIA,  
E-mail: [vlaicu.claudia@gmail.com](mailto:vlaicu.claudia@gmail.com)

**ABSTRACT**

*Defining illness is not an easy process, nor from medical perspective nor from theological one or individual perspective. However, the most important and truly significant seems to be the latter; how the contemporary man defines illnesses and how he uses this process to redefine his true being. Nowadays we face an obvious spiritual crisis meant to urge each of us to start a new process of redefining our spiritual identity. This paper is intended to remind us of the essence of our being on the one hand and of the Christian duty to fight against illness on the other hand, to bear permanently with us the model of Jesus, of the Holy Parents, who were subject to diseases also out of reasons that are related to God's iconomy. The limits of medicine are visible there where miracles start to reveal themselves and the healing of the body symbolizes and announces the healing of the entire Being.*

**Keywords:** *illness, spirituality, theological perspective, psychological perspective, healing, therapy*

**Introduction**

Although medicine has reached high scientific standards nowadays, doctors lost the core means of communications with the patients. More and more doctors are now focussed on the illness in itself rather than the patient. Treating the patient somehow from the outside, they deprive the patient of the means that may help him face the illness successfully.

The dominant values of the Western civilisation favour such an attitude. If the patient suffers from a type of cancer, the doctor is more preoccupied of submitting the patient to different types of treatments, transforming him into an experimental element deliberately ignoring the psychological and spiritual meaning of the disease he suffers from.

In an interview published by „The Watch” magazine, doctor Pavel Chirila mentioned the theology of illness as a discipline of study that he is determined to teach to young Romanians: „I teach a discipline-called the theology of illness-which encompasses bioethics, a modern discipline that is now taught abroad and included in higher education, because almost anything can no longer be, epistemologically speaking, without an ethical approach of the respective field”. [1]

In the interviews he offers on this theme, he emphasizes the importance of developing a Christian bioethics based on the Holy Scripture, on the love experience of the Church and patristic learning [.....].According to him, Christian bioethics is a part of general bioethics, based on four specific principles: firstly, the Christian bioethic man must believe that the material universe, the biological reign is a divine creation, that is was made before man and for man and that is why man has been created in the last day of creation; so that a universe shall be made for him; man has become a coronation of divine creation; man is a being created by God and the anatomic and spiritual integrity of human being is sacred. Christian bioethic cannot function without this axiom.

In the present work we try to align our efforts to those of Dr. Pavel Chirila by resizing and repositioning the significance of illness in the Christian life.



In other words, we remind the Christian theology bases of illness in general and of suffering in particular, of the modes of healing, using the current specialized literature, the founding teachings of the Holy Scriptures and of the Holy Fathers.

### **1. Reference literature in the field of Theology of Illness**

The most cited writings in literature draw our attention back to translations of Jean-Claude Larchet, *Theology of Illness* [2] and *The Christian in front of the illness, suffering and death*, [3] Ruediger Dahlke's book, *The Healing Power of Illness: Understanding What Your Symptoms Are Telling You* [4]. They both cite Scripture and the writings of the Church Fathers that we will also invoke there where we want to bring the theological arguments concerning the significance of illness. Also we mention the writings and interviews of Dr. Pavel Chirila or the actor Dan Puric, both the promoters of two fundamental theological principles proposed here: the first principle is that "the person contains in it the image of God, the "divine spark", which is indestructible," and if we believe this, then "community in orthodoxy is not just a community, but is the Church itself." The second principle relates to the fact that Sacred Scripture and the teachings of the Holy Fathers stand for the deontological code of Christian bioethics. Christian Bioethics is drawn from here "it is here where it comes back and returns to whenever it is needed to deliver a moral norm or give a piece of advice to a Christian, so that he should be protected from their sins." [5]

### **2. Theological perspective on the illness**

The year 2012 was declared by the Holy Synod of the Romanian Orthodox Church, "the year of the Holy Mystery of Unction reverential and patient care" in the Romanian Patriarchate. All dioceses and parishes, through their servants, were called to deepen this Holy Mystery from theological perspective and develop, in practice, means the Church, of healing and assist persons in distress.

"All illnesses are cause of suffering for us, as they reveal, cruelly sometimes, the fragility of our being, they remind us that health and life are not biological goods we possess on a long term, that our body, in this life, is destined to weaken, to degrade and ultimately to die". [6]

The teaching of the Bible interpreted by the Holy Fathers of the Church "link the illness, suffering and death of ancestral sin". [7]

They show that "the origin of the illness, incapacities, sufferings, degradation and death, and all evil currently affecting human nature, must be sought in the Act of will of the first man, in the wrong way in which he used his free will, in which he committed sin in heaven. [8]

If illness is a consequence of the fall of man, if it is linked to sin and not of human nature and, as such, is not 'natural' that man shall get ill, it means that, in fact, it is un-natural to us, is "contrary to nature." Now passions appear understood as illnesses of the soul, for the soul is healthy when it has no passions, and the health of the soul, says St. Basil, is virtue: "Every evil is an illness of the soul, while virtue is the health in itself". [9]

The soul is "naturally not tarnished by passions" [10] and passions constitute the illness of the soul, and the passionate state is a movement against nature. [11] However, the very nature can transcend that trend-not by its limited powers, but only through Union with eternal and everlasting God. Transcending this corruptible, convertible state, intrinsic to human being, was given to man as "reason" as the final destination, whose touch was given to man as a free individual: the first man as a free person was summoned directly to nature, either by himself or beyond his-self, by God. Adam- the first man, freely chose the first two [to make return nature to itself]. So illness out of natural possibility, has become a natural reality. It is no longer possible for human nature not to get ill; illness became a 'natural' phenomenon somehow acquired as the price of obtaining human freedom.

He, the man who is called by God from non-existence into existence, from "non-being to being", often forgets the meaning of his life, forgets about the cry of conscience, which is the voice



of the creator in man. The reason of the incarnation of the son of God from Virgin Mary is to heal humanity from sin and give them eternal life. [ John 17, 3]. Christian Church considers Jesus Christ Savior "Doctor of our bodies and souls," who came to heal man completely, with body and soul. His name in Juish means "God saves", in other words "heals". Saviour Christ is the "one who heals", "Save" and "liberate" human being from sickness and sin.

Christ refers often to the sins of the people at odds with the scribes and Pharisees, thereby showing that he wants to heal these wounds caused by sin: "Healthy ones don't need the doctor, but the sick. I've come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance "[2.17 Marcus]. In the crowd of healing of the Savior Jesus Christ committed on people, we observe that he is considering both physical-bodily illnesses, as well as the emotional-spiritual [mental] [Isaiah 53,5], asking on behalf of patients or their fellow faith and repentance.

"In terms of the relationship between illness and Sin and of people's responsibility in the emergence and development of illnesses which affect them, one sees that this relationship and this liability shall be immediately at home, because, as we have seen, the illness, even in the demonic side working through it, is a consequence of personal sin of Adam and Eve, which, otherwise, the Holy Parents often present, along with other evils resulting from this sin, as a punishment. [12]

Theological perspective presents us the illness as a try first of all. Reading about Job, I couldn't help doing the parallel with Job's situation. He is tempted by the devil to curse God, or to separate, to move away from Him. Through heavy tests he has undergone, God wanted to give him the opportunity to prove his faith, the power of the love of God, but also to achieve, as a result of efforts to face big challenges, virtues meant to get him closer to God.

Every human illness provide the respective person similar conflicting situations. We live in a world in which speed is the key word whn it comes to finding answers to our illnesses or problems. But here another key question arises: If we accept this theological explanation, however, how is it that the many of us find it difficult to adopt the attitude of waiting, subsequent to accepting the illness and its causes, how is it that many end up abandoning the prayer and get to despair while awaiting divine aid?The answer may be found also in the book of Job: because we don't have the patience and the faith he had. Because we haven't yet have learned, in fact, the deep roots of the illness from which we suffer, the hidden message of the illness, because many of us do not have the opening for such responsiveness.

Modern man wants the answer here and now and is no longer willing to wait. Though he displays an interogative attitude towards his illness, it is more directed toward God than to himself. The Holy fathers come through their writings with a psychological perspective on the illness, crossing most of the explanations offered in times their books with integrative therapies.

According to St. Maximus the Confessor, the quintessence of illness and mortality can be found in self-love. Self-love is not a simple passion; is the cause of all the passions: "Do you want to be free from passions? Then throw out the mother of all passion, love of the self ".[13]

In his book, Theology of illness, Jean-Claude Larchet invokes St. John Chrysostomos as the answer to the question: Why does God allow the Saints to be grasped in so many ways?He gives eight answers: "firstly to prevent the sublime virtues and deeds of the Saints to inspire pride" [ II Cor., 12.7]. "Secondly, out of fear that they may be worshipped more than men should be and thus not to be treated as gods, and not just as mere mortals. Thirdly, because the power of God to shine more "[II Cor 12: 9].

Fourthly, so that the patience of Saints to emerge with even more brilliance and to see that they do not serve God out of interest, but out of love, so that it would be clear that in the midst of troubles they are always equally devoted to God [...] In the fifth, to make us to meditate on the resurrection of the dead; because when we see a saint with so many virtues leaving this life only after he suffered an infinity of evil, we think about the future judgment, which will manifest to him the Justice of God. "In the sixth line, because those who suffer oppositions to feel a sense of relief



and caress, seeing that many saints have suffered the same, and even more. In the seventh line, because the [...] sublime of their actions will not make you believe that they were of a different nature than you, and it is impossible for you to imitate them [IAC 5, 17; Int Sol 7.1]. " Finally, in the eighth line, in order to learn what is happiness and misery really are", the true happiness being the Union with God through a virtuous life, and the only real misfortune shall be to be separated from Him. [14]

### **3. Psychological perspective on the illness**

If we accept the cause of the illness from this perspective, the theological self-love, it's easy to extract the psychological perspective. Self-love which replaced the love for Christ-gave birth to hedonism; but because pleasure was mixed with pain, the man was caught in an endless and desperate attempt to keep the pleasure and banish suffering. Hence the modernisation of means of livelihood, of alleviating suffering easily and quickly [mental and physical] by medication and/or alternative therapies. Terminological differences of the two domains do not prevent us from achieving the anatomy and etiology of the illness that mankind experiences. In psychology we speak of mental health and even the most perceptive therapists consider mental health as sufficient for a harmonious personality. In reality, it is found that the mental health without spiritual health gives the the safety of a harmonious integration into society, but not into the universe. In psychology it is solely spoken about mental illness and not spiritual illness.

The reality is that mental illness is not an illness like other illnesses. " Unlike other physical illness where physical realities are treated, "illness" is entirely a mental question of values, expressing what is right or wrong. In a period of time, homosexuality seemed so strange and hard to be understood that it was necessary to invoke the concept of mental illness to explain it. After the gays have made a large enough show and displayed their "numerical strength" claiming a certain social acceptance, it was no longer necessary and has not seemed appropriate to explain homosexuality as a illness.

### **4. The spiritual significance of illness**

In our opinion, both psychologists, psychiatrists and priests must approach illness starting from the individual perspective, that is the way that person relates to his own illness. Although all have a chance for spiritualization of their own illnesses, not all people have access to the spiritual meaning of the illness. That is why for those of us who do not believe in the existence and soul's salvation, psychologists are needed to help us to overcome existential crisis caused by sickness, doctors are needed for relieving the suffering caused by mental and physical manifestation of the illness. But for the Christian who wishes to find out the spiritual meaning of their own illnesses, he can continue his psychological journey being assisted the priest confessor.

Theological perspective on healing the illness starts from the healing of passions. The only therapy can be found in the removal of self-love, which is the root of all these passions. Considering that suffering is an inseparable element of the human condition after the fall, it is not removed by removing them, but by hugging them. Therapy comes with invitation to suffering and the experience of the latter. Of course, it often happens that the suffering be unbearable, and its experiencing may be exhausting. Therefore, each therapeutic treatment should be adjusted through a tailored pedagogy. The difference between psychological and theological perspective is essential in at least one point of view. Theological psychotherapy claims that under no circumstances should the therapist look at patient as cured only because it is "refreshed" psychologically and does not suffer. The tragedy of existence lies in the cross of Christ and no therapy can shorten the „crossing”. We often forget that hedonism is not fleshly, but only psychologically. By extracting the pain, therapy may give rise to hedonism, which constitutes an escape from reality and in the midst of true therapy. Psychotherapy practiced by psychologists and psychiatrists seek psychological balance.



Communicating the diagnosis, informing and educating the patient suffering from illness, psychological assessment, emotional rebalancing, assisting the patient in search of a sense for what lives and regaining cognitive control of the situation, all these are important objectives pursued during the sessions of psychological counseling. In Psychology/Psychiatry the latter is considered as the most widespread therapeutic method; it is based on the therapeutic relationship that is established in a safe and reassuring environment for the patient.

C.G. Jung refers to the process of individuation when talking about the psychic equilibrium, hence the Union of opposites. Thus, following analytical psychology with its guidelines which has the greatest resemblance to Orthodox therapy we can consider that mental harmony and self-realization are the two major goals of therapy psychologists. Note that self is approached from the perspective of analytical psychology here [the self exists as a mental reality, just like God, as a fundamental factor of human experience can be shown on the psychological plane.] The resulting mental harmony always produces an improvement in relations with his fellows, a better relationship with family members, the community at large. Jung cites hundreds of cases that reveal the process of individuation. Therefore, both therapies have in common, however, an important premise, namely that it is important for a person to understand and integrate his own illness from the philosophy of illness, from taking into consideration what the illness reveals about his condition. It is not about a simple psychosomatization, although this is an important step in the analysis of the illness, but about the prospect of endowing illness with a spiritual sense. Theological perspective on the illness exceeds therefore the psychological comfort somehow obtained by humanistic psychotherapists. Obtaining mental health is not enough and in no case is it equivalent to healing. In orthodox theology, a superior stage of analysis comes from understanding that Providence works within this condition of suffering from an illness; the next step is to discover God's plans and intentions with respect to us ; this is a step toward discovering the hidden message behind illness. The illness gets to be seen at some point as endowment of some sort and not a catastrophic condition no matter if it's about cancer or about depression. The Holy Parents frequently stress the fact that the illness manifests spiritual pedagogy.

In conclusion, true theologians [Father Professor Ioannis Romanis' studies bear witness to that effect], as well as true psychologists know that there is nothing exaggerated or nothing untrue in presenting Christianity as a rigorous therapeutic discipline for the treatment and healing of illnesses of the human soul.

### **5. Stages of healing**

In order to heal the soul, it is critical to realize that we are sick. Up here, everything is common with the first step of any psychotherapy. The distinction appears in the next phase, because in Orthodox psychotherapy "self notification" appears related to this awareness and is always accompanied by humility. Furthermore, it is recommended that this process be guided by the priest confessor, who directs the sick person on the way of Orthodox piety. In terms of asceticism, it is considered that since the man has five senses, there shall be five ascetic practices: vigilance, prayer, study, restraint, silence [isihia-the Greek term]. The ascetic must combine the five senses with these practices: the sight with the vigilance, hearing with study, smell with prayer, taste with restraint, touch with silence. Practicing asceticism is tantamount to applying the law of God and his commandments [see, for example, the Beatitudes from the Bible]. Therefore, a second very important recommendation is the fulfillment of the commandments; asceticism is, mainly, encompassed in the commandments of God. The basic commands that enable spiritual healing are: fasting, vigilance/watching and prayer. Contemplation is a therapeutic process that helps us to purify and heal our passions. The prayer is accompanied by watch. Silence is of two kinds: silence of the body [withdrawal to isolated places, minimizing the outside world representations or images of this world, perceived by the senses and passed on the soul] and of the soul [mind's ability and



strength of not accepting temptations, of focusing on the heart, through the vigilance and humility. The human mind or energy converges towards the heart or the essence, and accompanied by the latter gains partial or full knowledge of God. Behavioral aspects of the Orthodox psychotherapy are reflected by going to the Church, good deeds of mercy, confession etc.

Theological vision is the vision of the ill man who has a chance of healing within the Church. Gaining full health takes place within the Church of Christ. Our incorporation into the Mystic Body of Christ and our Union with him takes place in the Holy Mysteries. Receiving the Sacraments, first of all we are cleansed; this purpose, which sits in first place in the case of Confession, with a "repairment" function is affirmed in all the other Sacraments. Thus, Sacraments, to varying degrees, are regarded by the Church as a means of healing.

### **Conclusions**

Psychology can act as a painkiller for people who, intentionally, have no connection with the Church, so as not to get into an unrecoverable condition, but we do not seek, as spiritual beings, only psychological balance but the fulfillment of life, that is the last stage of the cycle of healing.

In conclusion, for the troubled man who does not get into any contact with the Divine, the humanistic psychology is the first recommended to restore the patient's peace of mind. It possesses much simpler tools, more available to the sick person, who is invited to make use of them under the guidance of the therapist. Let's take into consideration the fact that there are many people who have different religions, different cultures and others who have no knowledge of God. But the great Fathers of the Church are right to assert that for those people who have knowledge about God and want to go beyond the stage of knowledge, following the limited path of the rationality, none of these therapies may be useful. Spiritual life lived intensely and authentically may be the binder for anyone who begins to develop his personality fully aware of the spiritual dimension of the self. Therapeutic path ends where the mind turns into the Temple of the Holy Spirit.

Church has the Spiritual Fathers, the sacrament of repentance and the communion. If man is to be cured of individualism, he must go further, by linking with others, in any form, even the negative one. Our love between us is not perfect, because the units of the Being between us is not perfect. We are called to grow in perfect love between us, through God's grace and increasing the unity of our human Being through therapeutic dialogue. First of all, the communion "exists" and it's coexistent to God. As a result, the great call that resides before us for a real therapy is moving from human existence to coexistence;

The road is not easy, however, as Holy Fathers state. The difference between Divine wisdom and human wisdom is as great as the difference between the psychotherapy performed by the psychologist or psychiatrist and the Orthodox psychotherapy, which belongs to the Church, along with the father confessor. The unifying power for the completion of any type of therapy, with all its stages, however, belongs to a single therapist who could successfully lead the way: to God.

### **Bibliographical notes:**

- [1]. Fragments of the conference held by dr. Pavel Chirilă at „Dumitru Stăniloae” Philocalic Festival, May-June 2008
- [2]. Jean-Claude Larchet, *Theology of Illness*, [Sibiu: Oastea Domnului Publishing House, 2005]
- [3]. Jean-Claude Larchet, *Christian in front of illness, suffering and death*, [Bucharest: Sofia Publishing House, 2004]
- [4]. Ruediger Dahlke, *The Healing Power of Illness: Understanding What Your Symptoms Are Telling You*, [Bucharest: Trei Publishing House, 2008]
- [5]. Fragments of the conference held by dr. Pavel Chirilă at „Dumitru Stăniloae” Phylocalic Festival, May-June 2008



- [6]. Fragments of the conference held by dr. Pavel Chirilă at „Dumitru Stăniloae” Phylolalic Festival, May-June 2008
- [7]. Jean-Claude Larchet, *Theology of Illness*, [Sibiu: Oastea Domnului Publishing House, 2005] ,p.7-8
- [8]. Jean-Claude Larchet, *Christian in front of illness, suffering and death*, [Bucharest: Sofia Publishing House, 2004],p.47
- [9]. Jean-Claude Larchet, *Christian in front of illness, suffering and death*, [Bucharest: Sofia Publishing House, 2004], p.47
- [10]. Saint Isaac Sire, Epistle 4, p. 380; Saint Basil the Great, Omilii to Exaimeron, PG 29, 196 C and Concision of terms, PG 31, 1152 B, 1296 AB and 1906 BD; Saint John Chrysostom Paschal Homily [Hieratikon], Homily 2, 4, PG 61, 21
- [11]. P. Nellas, *Man – divinized animal. Perspective for an orthodox understanding of man*, Athens, 1979, p. 69.
- [12]. Saint Gregory of Nyssa shows that passions are rooted in the bad use of those things created by God and when familiarity to God vanishes its place is taken by the opposites, replacing God, as passions become divine[Saint Gregory of Nyssa, 8, BEII 65 A, 261]
- [13]. Jean Claude-Larchet, *Theology of Illness*, [Sibiu: Oastea Domnului Publishing House,2005] p.32-33
- [14]. Jean Claude Larchet, *Theology of Illness*, [Sibiu: Oastea Domnului Publishing House, 2005], p.52-53