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Health Services in the Early Church

REVEREND ALOYSIUS ROCHE

Knowing what medicine owes to the enterprise of the ancient Greeks, it is rather surprising to find Christian apologists, even in the fourth century, claiming that the Church was doing far more for sick people than had been attempted or even thought of in classical times. Yet this claim has never been challenged. At the time it was made it was not challenged even by those who were most disposed to resent it. Writing in the middle of the same century, the Emperor Julian (the Apostate), a pronounced adversary of the new religion and, therefore, a reluctant witness, was forced to cry shame on his fellow-pagans for allowing the impious Galileans, with their meagre resources, to throw into the shade those who could draw on the wealth of the Empire.

By being the first to get medicine on to a scientific footing, these clever Greeks placed the whole medical fraternity in their debt. Yet, owing perhaps to their preoccupation with the abstract, their researches had tended to remain on an academic level, with less and less attention paid to their exploitation in the in-

terest of the community as a whole. Their health services, having got off to a very promising start, failed to keep pace with the march of Graeco-Roman civilisation. We hear tell of institutions for the blind, for the dying and for maternity-cases at the Epidaurus, but what evidence is there that there were many, or even any, general hospitals in the modern sense?

The Romans were an essentially practical people with harder heads. But they came late into the field and were more borrowers than anything else. At any rate, they never really got down to the job of providing for their sick people. The rich could afford to have the best that was going; for example, a medical man was in full-time attendance on the Emperor Julian himself, no doubt to keep him in trim for badgering the Christians. Paid practitioners marched with the legions and saw to the health of the gladiators and the slaves. But, in these cases, the motive was purely utilitarian, no different from the motive that led them to provide clinics and veterinary surgeons for the horses wounded in battle and the cattle falling ill in the fields. Apart from setting up a free dispensary in one of the streets of Rome and a small hostel on an

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island in the Tiber, the richest city in the world did nothing.

The Church, on the other hand, and from the very first, made it plain that the ailing, and especially the ailing poor, were going to be cared for and treated as a matter of obligation, an obligation as binding on the faithful as the obligation of serving God.

For well over two hundred years, there was not a great deal that the ecclesiastical authorities could do. Anything in the nature of an institutional health service was out of the question, at a time when Christians were debarred from building even places of worship. Yet, even in Apostolic times, the welfare of the sick had become an integral part of the Church's ministrations, backed up by formal directives and exhortations. At the "assemblies," collections were regularly made for this purpose, and it was the special duty of the deacons and deaconesses to attend to the sick in their own houses; and not only the deacons and deaconesses either, for we learn from Justic Martyr that all the faithful, particularly the women who had most leisure, considered it incumbent on them to take an active part in this work, without being deterred by any fear of infection: a Woman's Voluntary Service.

One big difficulty arose and was to persist for some time, the scarcity of qualified practitioners who were Christians and, therefore, could be resorted to or called in to prescribe for their fellow believers. The only alternative to these were the pagan physicians, clerical and lay, whose

techniques were so and up with the prevailing idolatry as to make them unacceptable to the sensitive conscience of the new converts.

One is tempted to think that St. James had his predicament in mind when he came forward with his instruction "to call in the priests"; not the Asclepiadae or priests of the temple—but their oil, priests, and to rely on the anointing with oil (the symbol of strength and recuperation) and the prayer of faith to supply the place of professional skill no longer available. This *Sacramentum Olei*, to give it its original and proper title, was accepted and welcomed for what it certainly was, a genuine health service. Hundreds of years were to pass before its primary aim was almost lost to view, and a new name given to it; with the result that Extreme Unction is now regarded by the majority of Catholics as a preparation for death.

Next, the Church set about tackling a health problem hitherto regarded as insoluble. Classical antiquity was familiar enough with the phenomenon of demonic possession which they regarded as the *ne plus ultra* of human afflictions. But nothing was done about it, owing to the conviction that the victims were subject to a divinely appointed fate, and a physician who started meddling with them was asking for trouble. By all accounts, the ordinary practitioner had to mind his step, in those days, owing to the unpredictable behaviour of these precious immortal gods. If he was very good at his work, he might fall into disgrace with the higher powers, like Asclepius himself who was murdered by

Zeus, all because his skill was threatening to depopulate Hades—professional misconduct with a vengeance.

But it was not only the possessed who stood to gain by this discipline. Thanks to this bold and forthright attack on the evil spirit who was usurping the throne of the Holy Spirit, the Church was really exorcising the human mind bedevilled by a tormenting superstition that had actually hindered the development of the healing art, notably vis-à-vis the leper, the insane, and the deaf-and-dumb. The one and only true God is no more responsible for our diseases, physical and mental, than for our wrong-doings: this was the consistent teaching of the Church. Sickness and sin are fruits of the same evil tree, with the enemy of mankind playing a part in each case. But our God is the Lord of all before whom the powers of darkness tremble and are afraid. To drive this lesson home, the sick were exorcised as well as anointed: "May all the power of the devil be extinguished in thee." And it is significant that the first Christian hospitals were dedicated to the Holy Spirit the Comforter, literally, the Strengtheners.

The therapeutic value of the Sacrament of Repentance became apparent for the same reason. The absolution of the priest, deputizing for Him who came to take away the sins of the world, disposed of the current belief that "not even the gods can undo the past": Nemesis was one too many for them. Repentant sinners were reconciled to themselves—a very important point. The

"Go in Peace" sent them out from the tribunal pacified in mind and conscience, and in a mood for making a fresh start—another important point. We take the doctrine of "the forgiveness of sins" (of all sins) for granted, but to the Mediterranean peoples, familiar with the mythologies, who heard it preached for the first time, it must have come as something of an eye-opener.*

Meanwhile, the Church was biding her time, patiently waiting for an opening and an opportunity. This came in the first years of the fourth century and, almost immediately, hospitals properly so-called made a worth-while entry into medical history. Sitting in 325, the first Ecumenical Council decreed as follows: "Let houses be built in every city as retreats for the sick and the poor, and let the bishops cause alms to be continually gathered in for this charity which obtains the remission of sins and is, of all others, the one that brings man nearest to God."

This peremptory command was obeyed so promptly that a document drawn up twenty-five years later, mentions the building of hospitals as a routine duty of bishops. St. Basil's foundation is the one we happen to know most about, but it was far from being the first in the field. Criticized by some on the ground that it was devouring the alms of the faithful, this was certainly no ordinary hospital, but a veritable *Civitas Medicinalis* complete with battlements and walls. It was described as one of

* e.g. St. Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage, owed his conversion to this article of the Creed.

the wonders of the contemporary world, surpassing the hanging gardens of Babylon and the pyramids of Egypt.

There was an isolated building for lepers and an accident ward, a section reserved for the maimed and the crippled, and an ambulance service—all this over and above provision made for the common diseases and infirmities. It was served by a staff of professional nurses and doctors, assisted by semi-trained attendants of both sexes. There was, besides, a team of research workers housed in the equivalent of a laboratory or medical school.

Within the compass of this short article, it is not possible to do more than indicate some of the other facilities initiated by the Church soon after she was given her freedom; convalescent homes, provided

in the houses of the wealthy, for recovering or recovered patients; the provision of blind guides; and a beginning made at the difficult task of educating those afflicted in this way; asylums for the deaf and dumb, formerly regarded as outcasts, and the appearance of a manual alphabet enabling them to "talk": and, finally, the *morotrophes* or nursing-homes for the mentally afflicted.

In due course came the great break-away. The Church hitherto based on the city, broke out and, using her monks as carrier-pigeons, proceeded to spread the Gospel message over the European countryside. For the next five centuries, northern Christianity was based on the monasteries. And so was the healing-art, to whose history a new and fascinating chapter was now added, a chapter entitled Medicine in the Cloister.

