

Holy Unction
Re-catechism 2
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Introduction

Everyone who is born into this world will at some point come face to face with sickness. It is a guarantee. The harder part is to understand the pain and suffering that come with sickness, because every form of illness causes suffering. And this suffering is not only physical and psychological, but it is also a spiritual suffering. And yet the questions remain. Why? Why me? Why now? What is to become of me?

The Beginning

1. God is not author of evil.

- ❖ St Basil writes: "It is folly to believe that God is the author of our sufferings; this blasphemy destroys God's goodness." "Illness is not fashioned by the hand of God." "God, who made the body, did not make illness, just as he made the soul but by no means made sin." It is also equally clear that "God did not make death."
- ❖ St Maximus the Confessor says that "God, in creating human nature, did not introduce suffering into it," and that the susceptibility to suffering, corruption and death that followed did not come from God.'
- ❖ St Gregory Palamas says "God created neither death, nor illnesses, nor infirmities." "This death of the body was not given by God; he neither made it nor did he ordain that it should be! Nor is God the author of bodily illnesses"

- ❖ St Maximus the Confessor writes: "The first man, receiving his being from God, came into existence free of sin and corruption, for neither sin nor corruption were created with him;" and "the change in man toward suffering, corruption and death was not there in the beginning."

2. The source of sickness, sufferings, and death is the free will of man and in the wrong use of this free will; in other words, in the sin committed in Paradise.

- ❖ St Maximus the Confessor says: "The misuse of his freedom of choice introduced into Adam susceptibility to punishment, corruptibility and mortality."
- ❖ St. Theophilus of Antioch also says: "For the first creature, disobedience procured exclusion from Paradise; in his disobedience, man acquired fatigue, suffering and distress, and finally he fell into the power of death."
- ❖ St Irenaeus writes that it is "because of the sin of disobedience that illnesses torment mankind."
- ❖ St Gregory Palamas asks: "From where do we get our weaknesses, illnesses and other evils that give rise to death? From where does death itself come? From our disobedience to the divine commandment, from transgression of the precept which God gave to us, from our original sin in the Paradise of God? Thus sicknesses, infirmities and the weight of all sorts of trials are the result of sin. Because of sin, in fact, we have clothed our sick bodies in garments of skin; mortal and overwhelmed with suffering, we pass through this temporary, impermanent world, and we have been condemned to live our lives at the mercy of countless evils and multitudes of calamities. Illness, as a result, is like a short and difficult pathway

down which sin has led the human race, and the end of this pathway, its ultimate limit, is death."

- ❖ St Gregory of Nyssa writes: "This rejection of the Good, once accomplished, had as a consequence the appearance of all forms of evil: the fact that man turned away from life led to death; by depriving himself of the light, he fell into darkness; lacking virtue, evil appeared in his life; and thus it is that all forms of good were one by one replaced by a series of opposite evils."

3. The consequence of sin is that we became corrupted and subject to death, because we were now separated from God and deprived of divine life.

4. Sickness is a direct consequence of the personal sin of Adam and Eve. In other words, all humans do not inherit the sin of Adam, but rather the consequences of that sin.

5. All of us still bear responsibility because we have become imitators of Adam. We too have sinned and so we too suffer the consequences of sin. St Paul says: "by one man sin entered into the world, and by sin death; thus death spread to all men, because all men sinned" (Romans 5:12).

Why Suffering?

1. Being a Christian does not mean avoiding suffering.

2. We need to get away from the mentality that just because we are Christians that everything will be perfect in our lives, and that we won't have any problems. God doesn't call us out of this world into

some cozy reality where everything is perfect for us. God never made any such promises to us.

3. The difference between those of us who accept Jesus as our God and those who don't is not whether or not we will get sick and suffer, but rather the difference is in the way we experience and understand what is happening to us.

4. In the Bible it says that we are like jars of clay and like a brief mist. Everything that we desperately try to hold on to in this life, whether its our possessions or our loved ones or even our own life will not in the end last. These things that we have incorrectly learned to put so much value on are not the prize. God is the prize. Augustine the Blessed writes: "You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you."

Sacrament of Holy Unction

1. "Is any among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; and the prayer of faith will save the sick man, and the Lord will raise him up; and if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven" (James 5:14-15).

2. The Orthodox Church continues this apostolic practice by giving the sacrament of holy unction to all who are sick.

3. The service of Holy Unction is done by seven priests.

4. The service is made up of three sections.

- a) The first part is a "service of consolation" (*paraklesis*).
- b) The second part is the blessing of the holy oil to be used for anointing. After having prayed "for the blessing of this oil through the power, the action and the descent of the Holy Spirit," the seven priests, each in turn, say the following prayer: "O Lord who, in thy mercy and compassion, healest the torments of our souls and bodies, thou thyself, O Master, sanctify this oil that it may be a healing for those who are anointed with it and an end to all suffering, to every physical and spiritual infirmity and to all evil."
- c) The third part consists of the anointing of the sick by each of the seven priests. Each unction or anointing is preceded by readings from the epistles and from the Gospels, for a total of fourteen readings. After the readings, a further seven prayers are read for the anointed.

5. The unction is then administered, together with the prayer: "O holy Father, physician of our souls and bodies, who hast sent thine only Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, to heal all evil and to free us from death, deliver also thy servant (Name) from his weaknesses both physical and spiritual, through the grace of thy Christ, and preserve the life of this man ... for thou art the fountain of healing, O our God, and we ascribe glory to thee and to thine only Son and to thy consubstantial Spirit, now and ever and unto ages of ages."

6. The seven priests together place the open Gospel Book on the head of the sick person and say a prayer asking God for the forgiveness of his sins. In fact, the entire service has this undertone of repentance and penitence. The main reason for this is that the aim of this sacrament is not merely physical healing but also the healing of spiritual illness and the forgiveness of sins.

7. It is important to use Holy Unction often. It is not always necessary to have seven priests for this sacrament. Keep some holy oil in your home and apply it to your family often and pray for the healing of their soul, their emotional well-being and their physical health.

Conclusion

1. Remember the story of Lazarus, Jesus' friend? Jesus wept for his friend Lazarus. And those who saw Jesus cry said, "see how he loved him" (John 11:36). The tears of Christ are a powerful reminder of the compassion of God as we, like Lazarus, suffer and die.

2. God is united with us in our suffering. As Christians we can never doubt God's love for us. We may not always understand it or be able to explain it, but we can be sure that God is always with us. He proved it to us by giving us His Son so we would know the full depth of His love for us.

3. Suffering, death, and sin are all part of our tragic fallen human situation. The way things are is not the way things are meant to be, nor the way they shall remain. One day all of creation will be changed: "God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away" (Revelation 21:3-4).