# A HEALTHY MIND MAKES THE BODY HEALTHY – OR AN APOLOGY FOR MAN'S MENTAL HEALTH

***Florin Vârlan***

***Assist. Prof., PhD., Valahia University, Târgoviste***

*Abstract: We are living times when disease has become a subject as scary as it is obssessive. We hear people talking around us more and more about various forms of cancer – this disease of the century, whose cure is hard to find. Its weight burdens not just the body, ruining it, but also the psychic, disarming the sufferer and isolating him from the others. This is why I consider that, in order to face such a tense and discouraging state, it is necessary to understand what man is and how disease ought to be received. Only understanding man as body and soul and bringing into light the influence of the soul's integrity on physical health, can one offer to the man of our days the hope of a brighter life, although shadowed by the presence of a merciless disease. Such an attitude relies on faith in God – our Creator and Healer – and is built on the awareness regarding the state of sin darkening the soul, which needs to be freed by repentance. The Church, by its divine services, especially by the Mystery of the Confession of Sins, offers the chance of the meeting of the physically and spirtually ill man with God – "the Doctor of our souls and bodies", so that by this relation man may receive bodily but especially spiritual healing.*

*Key words: psychic, mind, soul, disease, healing.*

## *Introduction*

Man is body and soul. They are not two isolated entities put together but perfectly compatible realities, interdependent, meant to live as a single unitary entity, which we call hypostasis or human person. This reality of the existence of the two elements and the mystery of their union is the key letting us understand man in his entirety and the human life with all its complexity. Accepting this truth also entails admitting the fact that, by the body, man is connected to matter, to the earth, and, by the soul, he is connected to God, in Whose Image man was created and to Whose likeness man is called (Genesis 1: 26 - 28). And since God is Spirit (cf. John 4: 16), this means that this unity body-soul needs to attain a state of high spirituality, which can only be realized in a close relation with the Divinity and only if the body lets itself led by the soul.

According to the Church Fathers, that breath of life that embraced the body penetrating in each of its small parts is the rational power which, having the body members in its service, as if they were some tools, operates them according to its will[1]. For example, we shall quote Saint John of Damascus (7th-8th century): "The soul is a living substance, simple, non-corporeal by its nature, invisible to the physical eyes, immortal, rational, spiritual, shapeless; it serves itself of an organic body and gives it the power of living, growing, feeling and giving birth. It

[1] SF. IOAN GURĂ DE AUR, *Scrieri – partea întâi. Omilii la Facere (I)*, in vol. PSB, nr. 21, translated by Pr. Dumitru Fecioru, E.I.B.M.B.O.R., București, 1987, p. 145.



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does not have a spirit separated from it, but its spirit is its cleanest part. Because the spirit is in the soul what the eye is for the body"[2].

Also according to the patristic tradition, the soul, one in essence, has three main faculties: the *mind* (gr. νούς), as potential of all the acts of knowledge and thinking; *appetite* (gr. ἐπιθυμία), as potential of all the desires and lusts and *the potential of irascibility* or *anger* (Gr. θυμος), which concerns the acts of courage, of manhood[3]. Thus, we find in St. Macarius of Egypt (4th century), an answer to the question "Is the mind something and the soul something else?", where he says: "Just as the members of the body, although many, compose a single man, similarly the members of the soul, although many: mind, conscience, will, thoughts that accuse and thoughts that defend, are, all, nevertheless, comprised in an entirety: they are members of the soul, and the inner man is but a single soul"[4]. In this sense, reason would be but a function of the mind.

Often, the Holy Fathers alternatively use the terms "mind" and "heart", the heart being a sort of center of the mind or of the soul, and the mind, the center of man. We take as an example the word of St. Diadochos of Photiki (5th century), who, speaking about the Holy Baptism, affirms that by this Mystery "the grace of God settles in the very depth of the soul, namely in the mind", so that from here, "from the depth of the heart, we may feel the divine love when we are thinking ardently about God"[5].

We gave these examples to render the way the Holy Fathers understood the *mind* as superior level of the soul, whose center is in the heart and which, being the innermost part in us, the most intimate part in us, is identical to the depth of the heart.

According to the interpretation of the Greek patrologist John Romanidis, the mind represents "that mental energy exerting its function in the heart of the spiritually healthy man"[6]. This energy represents a single action of the soul working in the brain as *reason* and in the heart as *mind*. Thus, the same organ, the *mind*, exerts a rational work, started from the brain, which leads man to understanding, interpreting and rendering the surrounding reality and at the same time has a noetical action, started from the heart, which leads man to attaining his aim: seeing God. "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" (Mt. 5: 8), as the Savior Jesus Christ will say, referring to those who accomplish all the virtue and have no evilness at all in their souls.

In conclusion, we can say that "in man, the soul and the body influence each other mutually without any of them being reduced to the other … the soul is in the elements that compose the body, yet is not confounded with them, and the body, in its turn, despite being ineffably united with the soul, does not lose its quality of body"[7].

***The mind and its influence on the body***

We identify, therefore, in the patristic thinking, a certain interdependence between some functions of the body and their application in the action of the soul, in the sense that man's somatic reality lends various functions to the reality of the soul. Thus, "the heart and the brain, considered organs of the body, in point of their vital functions, become - in the ascetic and

[2] SF. IOAN DAMASCHIN, *Dogmatica*, translated by Pr. Dumitru Fecioru, Editura SCRIPCA, București, 1993, p. 60.
[3] PR. PROF. DR. DUMITRU STĂNILOAE, *Spiritualitatea ortodoxă: Ascetica și Mistica*, E.I.B.M.B.O.R., București, 1992, p. 71.
[4] SF. MACARIE EGIPTEANUL, *Scrieri. Cele cincizeci de omilii duhovnicesc*, translated by Pr. Constantin Cornițescu, in col. PSB vol. 34, EIBMBOR, București, 1992, p. 126.
[5] DIADOH AL FOTICEII, *Cuvânt ascetic*, in *Filocalia*, vol. I, translated by Pr. Prof. Dumitru Stăniloae, Ed. Humanitas, București, 1999, p. 371.
[6] PĂRINTELE IOAN ROMANIDIS, *Teologia Patristică*, translated by Ion Marian Croitoru, Ed. Bibliotheca, Târgoviște, 2012, p. 25.
[7] PR. DR. VASILE RĂDUCĂ, *Antropologia Sfântului Grigore de Nyssa*, EIBMBOR, București, 1996, p. 91.



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noetical language - spaces, areas or centers where organs that do not have a material, but spiritual structure, operate, as is the mind in the heart and the reason in the brain"[8].

Among the teachings of our Savior, we find these, as well: "The lamp of the body is the eye; if then your eye is healthy, your whole body will be filled with light, but if your eye is evil, your whole body will be filled with darkness." (Mt. 6: 22-23). Their meaning shows that the eye is for the body what the mind is for the soul; and just as when one is blind, one is in a state of total disorientation, it happens similarly with the soul, when the mind loses its normal functionality. Therefore, just as we endeavor to have our physical eyes healthy, similarly we need to take care to have our mind purified from thoughts that distort it. We deduce, therefore, that the influence of the mind on the body takes place by virtue of the relation existing between the soul and the body, because a mind troubling the soul makes the life of the body dysfunctional, as well.

The mind, as the central part of the soul, has the capacity not just to seize the existence of the relation of interdependence between the soul and the body, but also to integrate the body in this unity, in the sense that it holds that power connecting the body to the soul and on which its harmonious organization and support depend. Describing the creation of man, the Holy Scripture shows that after the body was formed from the earth, God "breathed into his nostrils the breath of life and man became a living being" (Gen. 2: 8). The interpretation that we find for these words shows the fact that the breath of life represents the very nature of the soul, but also the power that gives life (sets into motion) the members of the body. In other words, the body offers a concrete framework of life for the soul, the life of the soul is part of the life of the body.

***The health of the body and the health of the mind***

The existence of two realities of the human person – the body and the soul, further leads to the idea of physical health and of the health of the soul, and at the same time to the existence of diseases of the body and diseases of the soul. What are the diseases of the body? This is a well-known aspect, dysfunctionalities of the body. What are the diseases of the soul? These concern, on the one hand, our psychological universe, those dealing with the rational side (exaggerate development of the imagination, memory dysfunctions, logic problems, phobias related to certain objects etc.), and, on the other hand, we have the spiritual diseases, which represent those dysfunctionalities appeared in our relationship with God. Under the burden of sin, the soul lives the feeling of guilt, of sadness, of an endless torment, a state manifested as well by some dysfunctionalities of the body.

Disease as dysfunctionality did not exist since the beginning in the human nature, but intervened after the ancestral sin, as a consequence of the departure of the grace of Life, therefore it concerns the spiritual side, yet it has visible manifestations in the bodily side. A man can suffer from physical, psychological and spiritual diseases, which may be or may not be connected, in the sense that the health of the soul does not always entail the health of the body, just as the state of physical health is not necessarily the consequence of a spiritual health. We meet situations in which people with a morality beyond reproach are not exempted of physical suffering, just as there are some with an immoral, fallen life, yet with solid health.

However, one can note a direct relation between the spiritual and the physical health, in the sense that a physical disease can have a spiritual cause. For instance, when we have a sinful passion, for instance gluttony, when we eat a lot, we make room for certain diseases, such as the cardiac ones, problems of the circulatory system; at the same time, when we get angry, certain dysfunctions occur in the organism, as it happens as well when we are overwhelmed by stress; alcohol consumption triggers psychological problems etc. At the same time, certain

[8] PĂRINTELE IOAN ROMANIDIS, *op. cit.*, note 8, p. 26.



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research works have made it possible to realize that the people open to the religious and living the faith authentically are less prone to depression and anxiety states, also having better stress management skills.

A cause of certain diseases can also be the influence of the devil, the existence of certain sinful passions disclosing the work of evil, in many of these cases getting to paranoia[9] or even suicide. In the Holy Evangels we find numerous situations in which certain diseased people were healed by our Savior, at the moment of the healing the eye witnesses noticing that the problem was a demonization[10]. These situations must be dealt with a lot of responsibility and one must not exaggerate. It may happen for certain people to be demonized, yet one cannot explain all the diseases by demon-possession, especially that there is a very sensitive line between some psychological diseases and the spiritual diseases[11]. Since in the relation spiritual father - believer, one can meet all kind of diseases, I think it absolutely necessary to turn to psychotherapy as well.

Regarding healing, one must take into account the fact that He Who made man has the power to restore his health, as long as man reenters his normal, natural relation with his Creator. One must not ignore the help of the doctor, who receives his calling as a divine gift, as the wise man says: "Give doctors the honor they deserve, for the Lord gave them their work to do" (Jesus Syrach 38: 1), yet the medical skills need to be supported by a strong faith manifested by the tear of repentance. Repentance is indispensable for a complete healing, which can only be realized with the help of the divine grace, which the diseased person receives by means of the Church Mysteries, meant to restore the human person entirely: body and soul.

If the spiritual treatment (the way of repentance) is not assumed with full confidence and followed all the way through until the end, there can be side-effects and even death. Saint Paul the Apostle speaks about such a situation when he writes to those of the city of Corinth showing the attitude one must have toward the Holy Communion: "Whoever, therefore, eats this bread or drinks this cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. A person should examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For the one who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgement on himself. That is why many of you are weak and sick, and quite a few are dead" (1 Corinthians 11: 27-30).

On the benefit of the presence of grace in the diseased body, St. James the Apostle speaks when he describes the Mystery of the Holy Oil, whose aim is to heal the soul and the body: "Is anyone among you sick? He should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; and the prayer offered in faith will restore the one who is sick and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to one another and pray for one another so that you may be healed. The active prayer of a righteous person has great power" (James 5: 14-16).

We distinguish, from the text above, the importance of the Mystery of the Holy Confession for the diseased man, but also the necessary presence of the priest in his life, whose role is to guide and help the diseased person to find the profundities of repentance and to recover his own dignity of immortal being, called to deification[12].

[9] Situation rendered by the expression: "the devil took away his mind" (Rom. "i-a luat diavolul mințile").
[10] See: the healing of the lunatic son (Mark 9: 14-29) or the healing of the crippled woman (Luke 13: 10-17).
[11] See the case *Tanacu*, when a priest avoided consulting a psychiatrist, considering that he can solve the situation by approaching it only from a spiritual perspective.
[12] DR. DMITRI AVDEEV, *Când sufletul este bolnav*, translated by Adrian and Xenia Tănăsescu-Vlas, Ed. Cartea Ortodoxă, București, 2005, p. 39.



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***Conclusions***

The mind is a mystery, just as the entire psycho-somatic human structure remains a mystery. It is put in relation with the soul, being understood both as the set of intelligible thought and images, namely the work and its energy, but also as the essence of the soul, the heart or the principle of the person's unity.

"The human soul is Christian by nature", as a Christian apologist said (Tertullian), showing the need to pay special attention to the care for the spiritual life. Man, aware of his double composition, will give the same attention to the health of the soul as he does to the health of the body (if not more), at the same time persisting in his endeavor towards the healing of the soul, as he does for the body.

A spiritual approach of the disease can only do good, this thing exhorting all man, all the more the diseased one, to pray to reinforce his spiritual powers. Knowing the importance that we need to give to the health of the mind, especially seen under its spiritual aspect, we realize how necessary the relation with the healing grace that we receive by the prayers of the Church, especially by the Holy Mysteries, is. Certainly, this attitude does not diminish the medico-biological approach of the health condition and, moreover, does not exclude the intervention of the doctor. The doctor and the priest work together with God for the healing of the mind and of the soul of the diseased person.

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