

## SPECIAL ARTICLE ΕΙΔΙΚΟ ΑΡΘΡΟ

# Historical view of healing practices of Christianity

In the context of the history of medicine, the search for fundamental, timeless and established therapeutic practices of a world religion such as Christianity is of particular interest. In the end, the research shows that the Christian Church, as a healing community, possesses and proposes a wealth of practices and methods which, through a specific healing dipole, contribute to the spiritual, mental and physical support of any person who follows its teachings.

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Ιστορική θεώρηση  
των θεραπευτικών πρακτικών  
του Χριστιανισμού

Περίληψη στο τέλος του άρθρου

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Christian Teaching gives meaning through its own perspective to the terms "healing", "disease", and even "death". Starting from the testimonies of the New Testament, Christ is the doctor "par excellence", the doctor of souls and bodies. Jesus said for himself: "I will keep on driving out demons and healing people" (Luke 13:32).

By extension, the purpose of the presence of the Christian Church in the world is the healing of every human being, by restoring communion with God. In fact, Christian teaching and its theological tradition "is neither a social philosophy, nor a moral system, nor a religious dogma, but it is a therapeutic treatment".<sup>1</sup> Therefore, "the Church

of Jesus Christ itself acts or should act as a healing community. All the members have a role, but some a primary and main one and commensurate with their talents and gifts".<sup>2</sup>

To address these problems and, in general, to strengthen and heal the struggling and suffering person, the Church has in its spiritual-pastoral "quiver", its special methodology, which has various methods and a multitude of means, which fight the causes of the disease.

Thus, with the assistance of the method of historical research, through the timeless search in this area of Orthodox Christian Teaching for data related to the strengthening, maintenance and improvement of mental and physical health, the enrichment of existing knowledge is attempted,

with elements derived from the Orthodox Christian value system, without then excluding the utilization of the research data by doctors or other therapists, as the usability of such research is the ultimate goal.<sup>3</sup>

## 2. CASE PRESENTATION

"Well-being" depends on the harmonious cooperation of mental and physical functions. It has been shown that there is a great deal of interplay between the functions of the mental and physical spheres, and it is believed that one cannot be ill and the other can remain healthy.<sup>4</sup>

At the starting point, therefore, of the research search for therapeutic means of the (Orthodox) Christian Church, we should "remove a misunderstanding, which prevails widely. The Church heals not so much with what it has, as with what it is. This point is very serious. As a rule, we all look for the means of salvation in the Church, but salvation lies in the very fact of the Church and one's integration into it. The difference is enormous and has practical significance in terms of treatment".<sup>5</sup> This clarification is particularly crucial in the context of the research, as it contributes the most to the historical understanding of the process of the emergence of the individual Christian therapeutic means.

## 3. DISCUSSION

Saint John Chrysostom (4th century AD) stresses that "invoking the Holy Trinity in faith has great power and helps people in all difficult situations. It expels disease, according to one's spiritual interest, and overcomes demons".<sup>6</sup>

"The invocation of the name of Christ has soteriological and confessional character. By uttering the name of God, humans come into communion with God, and God reveals himself to humans in the Son as the Father and Redeemer of the world. The believer calls upon Christ because he believes in his saving qualities".<sup>7</sup>

An important role in the healing and overall strengthening of humans is also played by their inner connection with the sanctified persons of the Christian church, the Virgin Mary, the Apostles and the rest of the Saints, and, of course, with the Angels.

But also, research-wise, historically and methodologically it is established that, beyond the preceding "healing" of persons, there is also a revealing and incredible historical narrative with an impressive healing imprint in the Gospel of Mark in the New Testament. There, the disciples of Christ approach the Lord and declare their inability to

heal someone possessed... It is then that the Lord Jesus reveals that: *"This kind (of demons) can come out by nothing, except by prayer and fasting"* (Mark 9:29). In addition, here is revealed a historical and God-given healing regimen, a "medical protocol", the expert scholar could discern, where the term "prayer" includes sacred mysteries, sacred services, individual and collective prayer, and the term "fasting" includes all the struggles that are needed...

Nominally reflecting the results of the research, we find that, as far as the first part of the therapeutic dipole is concerned, there are ten categories of means such as the Liturgical, which includes the Holy Sacraments (Holy Communion, Baptism, Chrismation, Ordination, Confession, Healing Oil, Marriage), but also specific functional material elements of healing, such as water, oil, wheat, wine, as well as special blessings and sequences. At the same time, the means move in the field of hymnology, pilgrimages, dedications, the sacred texts of the church, the prayer service of remembrance and lethe, heortology, symbolics, hagiography, naodomy, sacred objects – therapeutic vessels (vestments, komposhini, candle, candelabra, censer, bell).<sup>8</sup>

On the other hand, regarding the second part of the therapeutic dipole, beyond the fasting of food, and the rest of the human senses, there are also relevant therapeutic means, such as physical exercise and participation in the ministry of the church.

Of particular interest in the context of these recordings is the way in which each Sacrament of the Church, with Holy Communion at the top, is seen as a therapeutic treatment and remedy for the strengthening and preservation of the human senses and the whole human body, through an extract from a standard Eucharistic prayer after Holy Communion, a poem by Symeon the Metaphrastes (the translator), the most famous author of hagiological texts in the Byzantine Empire at the beginning of the 10th century AD, in one of the prayers of thanksgiving: *"O You, who willingly grant me Your Flesh for food, You are a fire, and You consume the unworthy! Burn me not, O my Maker, but rather pass through my composite members into all my joints, my innermost core, and my heart. Burn up the thorns of all my transgressions; purify my soul; sanctify my thoughts; make firm my legs, as well as my bones; illumine the clarity of my five senses..."*.

But again, we find this relevance in a theological report by a contemporary Bishop of the Church: *"The Orthodox Church is considered and is a spiritual hospital that heals humans, since the sacraments and the exercise, all the methods it possesses, are directed to this unique and essential purpose"*.<sup>9</sup>

In particular, sacraments and memorials<sup>10</sup> combine the memory of historical events with religious feelings of holy reverence and divine love. *"This link between memory and emotion, which is considered therapeutically very useful, has now been confirmed by Adam Anderson of the University of Toronto, Canada".*<sup>11</sup>

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

The therapeutic dimension of Christian doctrine is wide-ranging, as the abundance of its texts and a central part of its teaching deal with the healing of the vices, which are considered to be the basic source of the illness of human nature.

The Christian faith is not concerned exclusively with the soul of the human being, ignoring the body and its materiality, since this would give it the characteristics of a "monophysical" approach of the human being, which is heretical, since the genuine approach is holistic, i.e. concern for the human being as a psychosomatic entity. In this context, the therapeutic means of Christian theory are highlighted, which are applicable to the soul, spirit and body of every Christian.

The research and documentation of these methods, methodologies and means of prevention and treatment reveal that the entire Christian Church has been structured as a medical practice. At the very least, God, as far as the believer can approach him (spiritually, intellectually and heartily), is the perfect method of caring for, comforting and healing people. As a consequence, the science of theology and its individual branches contain a great variety of healing materials. This fact gives theology the character of a science, which runs in parallel with the field of health sciences (fig. 1).

It also establishes, the existence of a systematic set of therapeutic approaches of the believer, with theological (ecclesiastical), spiritual (metaphysical), experiential (empirical), worshipful (liturgical), physiological (somatic), artistic (philokalic), didactic (pedagogical), and normative (canonical) basis; thus, approaching each person from many aspects and applying the therapeutic means of the Christian Church. It is logical that, in the course of centuries and circumstances, cases of misinterpretation and aberration are sometimes recorded, in which the methodology of approaching people and its means lose their orthodoxy, orthopraxy and orthocriticism and return to pre-Christian paths (idolatry, witchcraft) or to heretical paths (alteration of basic theology).



**Figure 1.** Science and charity (Pablo Picasso, museum Picasso, Barcelona, 1897). It depicts the authoritative and dispassionate doctor, contrasted in this case with a nun who exudes empathy and tenderness, and the patient is right between the extremes.

A practical application of the historical record of the therapeutic theory of the Christian faith is the use of therapeutic practices to ensure particularly valuable mental health, balance and upliftment, in a process that, in modern times, is called mental resilience and adaptability.

A key challenge of our research, apart from the central issue of finding the therapeutic practices of Christianity, and indeed in relation to its historicity over a period of more than twenty centuries, was the classification of the research material. An interesting methodological finding was revealed. It became possible, thus, to place each therapeutic instrument on the basis of a classification, which had, on the one hand, persons (God – Jesus Christ, the Virgin Mary – saints, angels) and on the other hand a revealing methodological dipole, the hagiographical scholar "In prayer and fasting". On this axis a whole nursing, healing, supportive edifice is erected.

All in all, what seems to be achieved by the methods, methodologies and means that Christian therapeutic treatment utilizes and applies is the following: The strengthening of faith and the cultivation of composure, the achievement of stability of inner balance-calmness, the promotion of the possibility of overcoming current difficulties, the spiritual restoration, the empowerment of the soul (resilience), the proposal of a life beyond the daily concerns of life, rapprochement with God (beyond local and temporal limitations).

After all, the relevant (medical) observation is of particular interest: *"If all doctors would use a little of the Church's*

rules in our relations with the sick, then we would remind the obese that gluttony is a mortal sin and the many who suffer from high cholesterol or hypertension or diabetes that their health is a sacred matter. ... God gave love, we gouge out our

eyes. He gave us the joys of life, and we are crazy to have heart attacks. These things happen because we have lost the rules of religious life, faith, because we have lost the warm embrace of the mother".<sup>12</sup>

## ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

### Ιστορική θεώρηση των θεραπευτικών πρακτικών του Χριστιανισμού

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Στο πλαίσιο της Ιστορίας της Ιατρικής έχει ειδικό ενδιαφέρον η αναζήτηση βασικών, διαχρονικών και καθιερωμένων θεραπευτικών πρακτικών μιας παγκόσμιας θρησκείας, όπως θεωρείται ο Χριστιανισμός. Φαίνεται, τελικά, από την έρευνα ότι η χριστιανική εκκλησία, δρώντας ως θεραπευτική κοινότητα, διαθέτει και προτείνει πληθώρα πρακτικών και μεθόδων, οι οποίες μέσα από ένα συγκεκριμένο ιαματικό δίπολο συνεισφέρουν στην πνευματική, στην ψυχική και στη σωματική υποστήριξη κάθε ανθρώπου που ακολουθεί τη διδασκαλία της.

**Λέξεις ευρητηρίου:** Θεολογία, Θρησκεία και θεραπευτικά μέσα, Κλινική ποιμαντική εκπαίδευση, Χριστιανική πίστη, Φροντίδα υγείας

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