

HEALTH AND HEALING IN BYZANTIUM

BY

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BACKGROUND

Today, we hear much about the relationship between medicine and religion and/or spirituality. Books and papers have been written, and courses are now available in medical schools to teach physicians how to approach religion and spirituality with their patients. New research has stressed the interrelationship between the body and mind. The Heritage Foundation recently sponsored a symposium entitled "Is Prayer Good for Your Health?" One of the proponents was Harold Keonig who has done original research and published extensively on the topic. This type of discussion and these courses would have been unthinkable 15-20 years ago. In fact, throughout the 20th century, religion, prayer and spirituality were considered to have no place in the treatment of patients. Physicians were taught to stay away from these topics or at most to refer patients to their priests, ministers or rabbis.

Some consider this movement a totally new phenomenon. Yet, for those familiar with the Byzantine Empire and the Orthodox Christian Church of medieval times, they will immediately see the similarities with what was practiced then. In this paper, I would like to relate to you how medicine, religion and spirituality were integrated in the Byzantine Empire from the 4th century to its fall in 1453 to the Ottoman Turks. As we learn more about how the Byzantines approached this we may learn much that could be useful today. I will discuss first the role of society in philanthropy and then specific role models that we might use today.

PHILANTHROPY IN BYZANTIUM

Early Christians were divided on the use of physicians and medicines. Some believed that faith in Christ was all that should be necessary for a Christian. They were especially suspicious because so much of medical theory and practice depended on pagan Greek physicians. However, by the fourth century, as Christianity was no longer persecuted and became the dominant religion in the empire, Eastern theologians forged an enduring alliance between Christianity and classic culture including secular medicine. Greek philosophy and Greek learning were accepted in the East.

From the earliest times, the Church understood the relationship between physician and mental health and illness because they understood how man was created. The Greek Fathers of the Church led the way. St. Gregory of Nyssa said "medicine is an example of what God allows men to do when they work in harmony with Him and with one

another"¹. Basil of Caesarea maintained, "God's grace is as evident in the healing power of medicine and its practitioners as it is in miraculous cures"². And St. John Chrysostom said "because God gave them (physicians) a special talent to save others from pain and sometimes death, they have an urgent responsibility to share their talents"³. "... the fourth-century fathers emphasized the image of medical practice as the most suitable example of love in action-philanthropia, as Clement of Alexandria had called it. Medicine and its practice, thus, came to symbolize the central Christian virtue for Greek Christians. The learned theologian, Gregory of Nyssa told his friend, the doctor Eustathios, that the highest Christian virtue of charity belonged especially to the physicians. Because of this, Gregory judged their profession superior to all the others."⁴

This acceptance of secular medicine by the great Fathers of the Eastern Church paved the way for the flowering of medical science and the development of institutions of medical care in the East.

By the latter half of the fourth century and into the 5th century, philanthropic institutions supported primarily by the Church flourished in the East. There were homes for the poor (ptochotropheia), homes for orphans (orphanotrophia), homes for the aged (gerokomeia) and hospitals (nosokomeia and xenones)⁵. These philanthropic institutions thrived because the Church took seriously its role in relieving suffering (Matt. 25). Rival Christian factions often vied with each other in who would do more good works. In those days it was the Arians versus the Orthodox Christians. Wouldn't it be wonderful if we had such contests today? Who could do more to relieve the suffering of their fellow man?

ROLE OF THE ORTHODOX CHURCH

These philanthropic institutions were often associated with monasteries with the monks themselves providing the necessary medical and nursing care. St. Basil of Caesarea, (370-379) whose monastic rules all Orthodox monasteries still follow today, established a City of Charity (Ptocheion) outside of Caesarea where his monks were expected to go and minister to the poor and sick of the city. St. Basil himself, who had been trained in medicine in Athens, often was seen working with his monks and caring for the sick and infirm. It is interesting to note that St. Basil did not expect his monks to stay cloistered in their cells and pray all day. But rather should balance their prayerful life (theoria) with good deeds for their fellow man (philanthropia).

¹ Greg. Nys. Pauperibus p.12

² Basil, Regulae fusius tractatae interrogatio 55, PG, 31:1048

³ Chrysostom, De perfecta caritate PG, 56:279-280

⁴ Miller, Timothy S., The Birth of the Hospital in the Byzantine Empire, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985 p.56

⁵ Constantelos, Demetrios J., Byzantine Philanthropy and Social Welfare, Rutgers University Press 1968

When St. John Chrysostom became Patriarch of Constantinople in 390, he led the way with establishing many philanthropic institutions, including hospitals. In fact, St. John spent much of the Church's accumulated wealth on such institutions. This was one of the main reasons that he was so loved by his flock. By the 6th century, the philanthropic institutions had grown so rapidly that the state became the main source of the funding. However, the Church remained active often running the now state supported hospitals and other institutions. Justinian (527-565), one of the greatest of the Byzantine emperors, moved the archiatroi (main doctors of the city-a holdover from ancient times) into the hospitals. With the best physicians of the state now working out of the hospitals the care and reputation of hospitals improved significantly. Soon, every major city in the empire had several hospitals. It became a source of pride. Monasteries remained active in these institutions but there was much debate over the centuries of the proper role of monks in these institutions. A debate that has never been resolved.

Although the existence of some of these institutions was known, the exact running and administration of these institutions were not well understood. However, in 1896 the Typikon (Founding Charter) of the Pantokrator Monastery of Constantinople was published in Russian and in 1974 in French. The monastery was established and endowed by the Byzantine Emperor John II Komnenos in 1136. This Typikon is one of the few that has been found in its entirety. It is the only one in which a Byzantine hospital is described in great detail. In 1989 Timothy Miller published "The Birth of Hospital in the Byzantine Empire" in which he describes medical care in the early Christian era and outlines in great detail the Typikon of the Pantokrator Monastery⁶. The Typikon is so specific that it gives us a rare opportunity to see and understand how medical care was organized and administered in Byzantium and especially the role of the Church. The entire Typikon can be downloaded from the Internet⁷.

TYPIKON OF THE PANTOCRATOR MONASTERY

The Typikon called for several institutions. This included the monastery, three churches and two philanthropic institutions: the xenon or hospital and a gerokomeion or old-age home. Xenon was the common term for hospital in the Byzantine Empire. Nosokomio was another common term. The main church of the monastery still stands in Istanbul today and is known as the Zeired-kilisse-tzami (a mosque). The hospital building is no longer standing.

We are all so familiar with hospitals today that it is easy to think we have had them from antiquity. However, as Miller points out, there were no hospitals in antiquity and it was

⁶ Miller, Timothy S., *The Birth of the Hospital in the Byzantine Empire*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985

⁷ <http://www.stmaryofegypt.org/typika/typ038.html>

not until the 17th or 18th centuries that hospitals as we would know them became common in Western Europe. What served as hospitals in Western Europe during the middle Ages were little more than hospices. It was where the poor and homeless went to die. There were no physicians to be found in these institutions. However, the concept of a hospital as we would understand it developed in the Byzantine Empire in the 4-5th centuries during this great outpouring of philanthropic activities mention above. Many of the characteristics of a Byzantine hospital we would recognize today as expectations of our modern hospitals:

1. RESTORING HEALTH:

It is clear that the goal of a Byzantine hospital was to restore health. This is an immediate distinction from hospitals in Western Europe during the middle ages, which were little more than hospices- places to go to die. The Typikon makes several provisions that make this clear.

2. MODERN FACILITIES: The Typikon provided for modern well-kept facilities. Five wards were specified with approximately 10 beds per ward. The wards were divided by specialties: surgical, gastrointestinal, etc. A separate ward was provided for women- with a provision that it be staffed by female physicians! It specified one patient per bed (an important distinction- in western Europe patients were often forced to sleep several in one bed). Provisions were made for mattresses, sheets, pillows, and extra covers in the winter. Provisions for replacement for worn bedding was also specified. Six beds were provided for bed ridden patients- they have perforated mattresses. The Typikon also provided for two latrines (a men's and a women's). Patients were to be bathed twice a week. And three hearths were provided strategically for the colder months.

3. MEDICAL STAFF: The Typikon specified a full staff of physicians including physicians in training- what we would consider today as residents and interns. The best physicians of the city were required to attend on the wards of Byzantine hospitals. They would be on service every other month. During their months on service they could not see their private patients. This is a clear distinction with medieval hospitals of western Europe where there were no physicians present. Physicians of western Europe saw patients in their clinics or in the patient's homes but not in hospitals. It was considered beneath their dignity. This was usually because these institutions were poorly kept. In Byzantium, it was considered an honor to be chosen to serve in the city hospitals, since only the best were chosen. This undoubtedly made it easier for them to get private patients during their months off.

The Typikon specifically banned physicians from taking tips for the care they delivered at the hospital. The physicians received a modest stipend but in addition, they received training and the opportunity for a better private practice.

The physicians were to make rounds once a day in the winter and twice a day from May through September. The Typikon then says that “after singing a psalm they will examine the sick carefully and scrutinize each person’s illness in accurate detail, treating each person with appropriate remedies, making suitable arrangements for all, and showing great devotion and careful concern for all as they are going to render an account of these actions to the Pantokrator”!⁸ How is that for a charge to the physicians!

4. ANCILLARY STAFF: The Typikon provided for a number of ancillary staff including nurses, pharmacists and dietary staffs. It even specified how much food and what kind the patients would receive each day.
5. QUALITY ASSURANCE AND UTILIZATION REVIEW: The Typikon antedated these concepts with careful thought and attention. Two chief physicians (Chiefs of Staff?) were to be hired that would oversee the entire medical care. They were to make daily rounds and “ask each of the patients how he is being treated and whether he is being tended by those appointed to this task with proper care and attention, and he will actively correct what is not right, reprove the negligent, and firmly put an end to anything being done improperly.” “He will watch over everything with care and will properly attend to straighten out each matter.”⁹
6. MEDICAL EDUCATION: The Typikon also provided for medical education at the hospital. A respected academic physician would be full time at the hospital to teach medical students as well as the younger residents and interns. This physician would be the highest paid physician on staff. A medical library was also provided for.

From the above description, we would recognize the essentials of a modern hospital. However, the Typikon goes farther in emphasizing that the spiritual needs of the patients were also to be addressed. Two chapels were provided for (one for men and another for women). Each chapel would have a full time priest and lector. Divine Liturgy was celebrated in each chapel four times a week; Wednesdays, Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays. At least one priest was always to be available to hear confession. The concept

⁸ Typikon of the Pantokrator Monastery page 34, paragraph 39

⁹ Ibid. Page 34, paragraph 40

of holistic care (physical and spiritual) was key to the Byzantines' understanding of health and healing.

The Emperor then gave an exhortation to the entire hospital staff in the Typikon: "We give this instruction to all, to the doctors, the supervisors, assistants and the rest, that they all turn their gaze on him, the Pantokrator, and not neglect their careful examination of the sick, knowing what a great reward this work has when it is properly carried out and again what danger it brings when it is neglected and falls short of what is fitting. For Our Master accepts as his own what is done for each of the least of our brothers (Matt.25: 40) and measures out rewards in proportion to our good deeds. So then with regard to these our brothers we will all behave as people unable to escape the unsleeping eye of God and view with apprehension and great fear the time when we shall fall into his hands." What a fitting way to end the Typikon. ¹⁰

PHYSICIAN SAINTS

As we meet today on the feast day of our patron Sts. Cosmas and Damian, what can we learn to make ourselves better physicians, psychologist, or health care workers in general? When confronted with questions and challenges, I also like to look to the saints of our church to see how they handled similar problems and concerns. Fortunately, we have many Orthodox Christian physicians that are numbered among the saints. These men and women can serve as excellent role models for today's health care workers. An excellent book by Georgia Hronos outlines the lives of several such Orthodox saints that were physicians.¹¹ When we think of physician saints, the names of Sts. Cosmas, Damian and Panteleimon easily come to mind. And well they should. However, I would encourage you to read the lives of other physician saints, as well, such as Sts. Sampson, Thalleleos, Tryphon and many more. Physician saints are not just limited to medieval times. Especially inspiring is the life of St. Luke the surgeon of Simferopol in the USSR. His love and care for his patients and his sufferings are very poignant.¹² There are several traits that are common to all of these physician saints. Traits that I believe we should try to emulate;

- 1.They were all pious Orthodox Christians before they became physicians.
2. They lived an exemplary Christian life- they were conscientious in their prayer life, meditation and fasting. They regularly prayed for their patients. How often do we do this for our patients?

¹⁰ Typikon of the Pantokrator Monastery, page 34, paragraph 42

¹¹ Hronos, Georgia, The Holy Unmercenary Doctors: The Saints Anargyroi, Physician and Healers of the Orthodox Church, Light and Life Publishing, 1999

¹² Maruschak, Vasilii, The Blessed Surgeon: The Life of St. Luke of Simferopol, Divine Ascent Press, 2002

3. They were excellent physicians- often ending up 1st in their medical school class. For me this was most interesting. These early Christian physicians were not only priests or monks who learned just enough medicine to be helpful. They took their science seriously. They studied intensely and were renowned for their knowledge. An important lesson for all of us.

4. They had a deep and abiding love for their fellow man, often working long hours, forgoing pay (thus unmercenary) often. They often turned their own homes into early hospitals and fed and cared for their patients personally. They saw the image of Christ in each of their patients.

5. They believed that their skills to heal were God given and therefore there was no arrogance about them- they were humble (how often do we hear that about physicians today?). There is the beautiful story of St. Sampson who always prayed for his patients to be healed. However, he also gave them medicines so that the patients would not know that they were miraculously healed by his prayers and not by his medicines!

As Orthodox Christian health care workers we have a rich tradition of holistic health and healing from which we can learn. Both personally from our physician saints and from Byzantine Orthodox society and how they organized their medical services. The Byzantine Christians considered philanthropy as “love in action” and their philanthropic institutions the manifestation of this love. We should ask ourselves where are the manifestations of our love today? Where are our Orthodox hospitals, nursing homes, orphanages, and homes for the poor, for the homeless, etc. today?

Although, the Byzantium Empire came to an end over five hundred years ago, our Orthodox Church’s commitment to philanthropy must never come to an end. As Orthodox health care workers, let us work with our Church to be sure our love for our fellow man turns into action. It is a great challenge and a wonderful opportunity. And we have great models to follow.