

The Church's Prayer on Deathbed and the Moral Reflection on Euthanasia

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Abstract

Associating a prayer that belongs to the long-standing tradition of the Orthodox Church with a contemporary theme, such as euthanasia, may seem strange, as at the time the prayer was written, the ethical consideration of euthanasia was certainly unknown. However, the timelessness of illness, pain and death, the existential agony of human at the end of life and the unwavering commitment of the Church to the suffering and dying person allow, in our view, the exploration of the Church's prayer on deathbed in the context of the good and desirable death. It is noteworthy that, while in all liturgical texts the cure from illness is pleaded for, in this specific prayer the desire of death is expressed, in order to redeem human from the "unbearable suffering due to the bitter illness". In this perspective the content of the prayer is presented, which seems to have important elements in common with the modern demand for a positive response to euthanasia, namely the free will of the patient and the desire for a quick and painless death. Despite these, the prayer on deathbed does not favor the acceptance of euthanasia for two reasons: Firstly, the request for a painless death is addressed to God and its fulfillment is expected only from Him and not from the doctor or the relatives. And second, this request is accompanied by a plea for the forgiveness of the sins of the moribund, expressing his faith and hope in eternal life, his trust in God and not despair and distress. The article is concluded with some remarks concerning the understanding of good death from the point of view of orthodox ethics.

Key-words: *euthanasia, suffering, illness, prayer on deathbed, orthodox ethics, Tristram Engelhardt Jr.*

I. Introduction

Associating a prayer that belongs to the long-standing tradition of the Orthodox Church with a contemporary theme, such as euthanasia, may seem strange, as at the time the prayer was written, the ethical consideration of euthanasia was certainly unknown. Can a prayer with liturgical use since the first millennium respond to the management of a painful and incurable disease at the end of

life? If the sought out answer relates to the use of modern medical applications for the extension of life, then obviously the study of the prayer on deathbed (εὐχή εἰς ψυχορραγούντα) is futile. If, however, the answers we seek relate to what the term euthanasia stands for, i.e. the good death, and in this context to the questions, “if”, “when” and “how” is it good for man to intervene in the natural occurrence of death, then this specific prayer of the Church is, in our personal view, particularly useful for the exploration of the theological approach to the issue of euthanasia. Besides, the illness, pain, death and existential agony of human at the end of life are not contemporary phenomena, but are of timeless nature. The prayer on deathbed does not simply reveal the unwavering commitment of the Church to the suffering and dying person, but is a valuable liturgical text expressing in a genuine way the teaching, tradition and experience of the Church regarding the end of life. It refers to the exact context, in which the issue of good death and euthanasia is dealt with today. So, we will present the essence of the prayer, with emphasis on those elements that can be utilized in the contemporary reflections. Furthermore, the contribution of the theological approach to euthanasia will be explored and finally, the article concludes with the formulation of certain remarks.

II. Presentation of the prayer on deathbed

Before we present the content of the prayer on deathbed, we consider it necessary to refer briefly to the position of prayer in the orthodox liturgical tradition. Praying to God at the end of life is an ancient Christian tradition, which expresses man's agony at that crucial moment, as well as his faith in God. This practice is followed from the example of Christ, who prays both in the garden of Gethsemane before his arrest, as well as on the cross. Christ, as a human, is agitated in the face of his imminent death and asks the Father to avoid this difficult experience, but in the end asks for His will be done.¹ Christ's words on the cross have a prayerful nature, by which he forgives his crucifiers (Luke 23:34), he expresses the experiencing of the abandonment of the Father (Matthew 27: 46-47, Mark 15:34) and he delivers His Spirit to the Father (Luke 23:47, John 19:30). A similar example in the Bible is the Archdeacon and First Martyr Stephen, who at the time of his stoning prays to God to accept his spirit and to forgive the sin of his killing (Acts 7:59-60). On the basis of these biblical testimonies, the ancient Church developed impromptu prayers for the last moments of a person's earthly life, which are recorded in patristic and hagiological sources.² When later on, the various prayers acquired liturgical identity and comprised the missal, the prayer on deathbed was included in them in several variations and with different titles. It is noteworthy that after the 13th century the prayer

¹ Mathew 26:39-40; Mark 14:35-36; Luke 22:41-42; John 12:27.

² Dimitrios Tzerpos, *Η Ώρα του Θανάτου και η Ακολουθία εις Ψυχορραγούντα: Συμβολή στη Μελέτη του Βυζαντινού Ευχολογίου* (Athens: 2007), 34-45.

developed into a procession on deathbed (ἀκολουθία εἰς ψυχορραγοῦντα), even with its own iconographic cycle.³

The content of the prayer can be divided in four thematic sections: a) viewing of death as an expression of divine philanthropy; b) pleading for death to come, in order to redeem human from the unbearable suffering and pain of the bitter illness; c) asking for the forgiveness of the sins of the dying person and his rest in the kingdom of heaven along with the righteous and finally; d) believing that God is the repose of souls and bodies and the hope of the believers.

The prayer firstly refers to the creation of man by God “from the earth”, that is to say from the soil, which is reformed “in nature and beauty” and is beautified “in glory and righteousness” of the divine “glory and kingdom.”⁴ While human is created and derived from soil, he is asserted to carry the image of God and have the prospect of likeness with Him. The prayer does not further explain the teaching of man’s creation in the image of God, which refers according to the Church Fathers to the free will and dominion over creation⁵, however, emphasis is given on the disobedience of God’s commandment, which led the first-created humans to blacken the image of God and to experience death. Death enters the world because man “violated the commandment” of God and “received the image but did not preserve it”. Therefore, the responsibility for the coming of death weights on the first-created humans, who had been given a specific commandment and had been warned that the consequence of its violation is death. However, although death is attributed to the misuse of the freedom of human and occurs as a consequence of disobedience, it is presented in the prayer as a mean of the divine love and philanthropy. God “charitably”, as it is said, defines the separation of the soul from the body “so that the evil shall not become immortal”. With this justification, which is encountered in many patristic texts⁶, death is presented as the factor that prevents the perpetuation of evil and confines the egoism and arrogance of man. Thus, while God created man as a psychosomatic entity, death allows the temporary separation of the soul from the body which is decaying “to what it was created of” and ends up in the soil, from where it initially derived. This separation, however, is temporary for the benefit of man, since God will once

³ Dimitrios Tzerpos, *Η Ωρα του Θανάτου*, 47-108.

⁴ For the text of the prayer on deathbed see *Μικρόν Ευχολόγιον ἢ Ἀγιασματάριον* (Athens: Apostoliki Diakonia of the Church of Greece, 2009¹⁸), 230-231.

⁵ Saint John the Chrysostom connects the image of God mainly to the task of managing the creation. See John the Chrysostom, *Πρός Σταγείριον* 1, 2, PG 47, 427-428, and *Εἰς Ἀνδριάντας* 7, 2, PG 49, 93. Saint John of Damascus connects the image of God mainly with the freedom of man to shape the course of his life by having the ability to accept the will of God and to lead to His likeness or to discard it and be led afar from Him. John of Damascus, *Ἐκδοσις ἀκριβῆς τῆς ὀρθοδόξου πίστεως* 2, 12, PG 94, 920.

⁶ John the Chrysostom, *Πρός Σταγείριον* 1, 3, PG 47, 429, and *Εἰς Γένεσιν Ὁμιλία ΙΗ'*, 3, PG 53, 151; Gregory the Theologian, *Λόγος ΛΗ' Εἰς τὰ Θεοφάνεια*, 12, PG 36, 324D.; Gregory of Nyssa, *Εἰς Πουλχερίαν λόγος*, PG 46, 877A.

again restore their unity in the common resurrection and judgement of all during the second advent.

Following, the three persons of the Holy Trinity are invoked at the request for death to come and the rest of the moribund patient. The relative passage is as follows:

“For that we are praying to you the one with no beginning and eternal Father, and your only-begotten Son and your Holy Spirit that of one essence and the life-giving, to separate the soul from the body of your servant (name) and be put in rest”.

The same request is repeated a little further in an even more pleading way, as it also describes the plight that the man has suffered from illness and unbearable pain:

“Yes, God the Lord, hear me your sinful and unworthy servant in this hour, and relieve your servant (name) from this unbearable pain, and this bitter illness and put him to rest, among the spirits of the righteous”.

We can, therefore, notice that in this death stage Church is not praying for the prolongation of life but, on the contrary, for the painless advent of death. The desire to relieve the patient of the pain and have him repose in death is linked with the request for forgiveness of the sins that were committed in knowledge or ignorance, so that the person is forgiven and numbered after death with the righteous of the kingdom of heaven. The emphasis on the remission of sins before the coming of death is shown by the fact that certain severe sins are named and be followed by the invocation of divine goodness for their forgiveness. The prayer is concluded with praise to the Trinitarian God and the expression of the belief that God is the rest of souls and bodies.

III. The association of the prayer to the theological approach to euthanasia

The impressive advances in medical science over recent decades have made it possible, in many cases, to support the continuation of the function of human body and implement interventions to prevent the death of the patient and prolong his life. However, this increase is often not accompanied by treatment of the disease or by improving his quality of life, but in fact it is an extension of the difficult death stage. So, concerns are often expressed about the medically proper treatment of the patient. In this context, the request for euthanasia is presented today as the patient's right to decide freely for the time and the way of his death, a decision that the doctor is obliged to respect and realize. Especially, while the main reason a patient desires the end of his life is to be liberated of the pain and to die in dignity, euthanasia is

protruded by its supporter as the right to a free, painless and dignified death.⁷

The prayer of the Church on deathbed seems to have important elements in common with the modern demand for a positive response to euthanasia, namely the free will of the patient and the desire for a quick and painless death. The prayer presupposes free will, as it is not read for every moribund patient, but only for the one who expresses the desire to be eased from the suffering the illness is causing.⁸ It is characteristic that death is pleaded for with this prayer, while in other liturgical texts healing from illness is requested, as well as rehabilitation of the shattered state of the patient's health. Moreover, the same missal containing the prayer on deathbed also includes many prayers for the cure from illness, while among the holy sacraments of the Church there is also the Anointing of the sick, which is made to heal the soul and the body. It is also worth noting that among the prayers that are repeated in many Church devotionals, there is an orison for protection from sudden death, which is numbered among many other great tribulations, such as epidemic, hunger, earthquake, fire and civil war. The prayer is as follows:

“we pray that this holy church and this city, and every city and country, may be protected from anger, plague, famine, earthquake, flood, fire, sword, foreign invasion, civil war and sudden death.”

The prayer on deathbed, in our personal view, does not differentiate in regards to the view of illness and death from the rest of the liturgical tradition, but on the contrary, integrates in it very naturally. The believer prays for the healing of sickness and the preservation of health, but when the time of death comes, in the name of God and in the expectation of eternal life, expresses the request for a christian and painless end. Sudden death is therefore considered unwanted, not only because it is untimely and brings a lot of sadness to the relatives of the deceased, but especially, because it deprives the faithful of the time to prepare spiritually before death comes. This preparation is carried out with the prayer on deathbed, as it is not only painless death that is pleaded for, but also forgiveness of the dying, so that he can receive redemption and salvation from God. This dual request resembles the well-known request of Divine Liturgy “that the end of our life may be Christian, painless, unashamed and peaceful, and for a good defense at the fearful judgement seat of Christ”, which

⁷ For more details about the views of the supporters of euthanasia, as well as the contradictions to them see Miltiadis Vantsos, *Η Ιερότητα της Ζωής: Παρουσίαση και Αξιολόγηση από Άποψη Ορθόδοξης Ηθικής των Θέσεων της Ρωμαιοκαθολικής Εκκλησίας για τη Βιοηθική* (Thessaloniki: 2010), 189-211.

⁸ It is obvious that pastoral management on the part of the priest is very important. For more about the pastoral dimension of the subject see Serafeim Kalogeropoulos, “Η Ποιμαντική των Θνησκόντων και η Ακολουθία εις Ψυχορραγούντα”, in *Το Μυστήριο του Θανάτου εις την Λατρείαν της Εκκλησίας: Πρακτικά Θ' Πανελληνίου Λειτουργικού Συμποσίου* (Athens: Holy Synod of the Church of Greece, 2009), 543-577.

also advocates for a painless and peaceful death. As in the prayer on deathbed, the desire for a peaceful end is accompanied by the desire also for a Christian end, so that the faithful may have a good apology before Christ. However, despite of these similarities, the request of the Divine Liturgy does not request the advent or precipitation of death, but it expresses the desirable way for death to come.

The most contiguous in meaning reference to the prayer on deathbed is, in our view, the prayer of Job, who comes to such a grave situation that he asks in death relief from his pains. As it is narrated in the homonym book in the Old Testament, Job, without knowing the cause of the trials he is suffering, suddenly loses all his property and goes from being extremely rich to being very poor, loses all ten of his children, his health is shattered, he suffers from unbearable pains, he is abandoned by his friends, and becomes the object of peoples mocking. In this situation Job prays and asks to die in order to be redeemed from his sufferings.⁹ He says: “so that I prefer strangling and death, rather than this body of mine. I despise my life; I would not live forever. Let me alone; my days have no meaning.”¹⁰ Is it therefore the case of Job and the request of the prayer on deathbed two cases that can be paralleled with the contemporary request for euthanasia?

Although there are undoubtedly important common elements, both in the prayer on deathbed and Job's prayer, not only they do not favor the request for euthanasia, but offer, in our personal view, arguments in favor of its rejection, since there are two very important differences between them: Firstly, the request for a painless death is addressed to God and its acceptance is expected from Him and not from the doctor or the relatives. And second, the request for a painless death is accompanied by a plea for the forgiveness of the sins of the moribund, expressing his faith and hope in eternal life, his trust in God and not despair and distress.

These differences between the painless death of the prayer on deathbed and the painless death that is shown in the context of euthanasia reflect a radically different understanding of illness and death. In the first case the believer prays to God and asks for painless death. He does not personally decide for the end of his life, but he trusts God and puts his hope in Him. As Saint Basil the Great underlines, “death occurs when life reaches its limits, which since the beginning was judged by God's righteous judgement, who has foreseen every one of ours best interest from afar.”¹¹ The believer therefore, places his hope in the divine providence and love, because he knows that the most merciful and all-knowing God defines the end of his life to his benefit. He does not underestimate pain – that's why he is praying for a painless death – but

⁹ As Fr. Joel Giannakopoulos remarks in his interpretation, Job wants to die in the will of God and does not commit suicide. See Joel Giannakopoulos, *Η Παλαιά Διαθήκη κατά τους Ο'*, vol. 23 (Thessaloniki: 1986⁴), 76; Joseph Tham, “Communicating with Sufferers: Lessons from the Book of Job”, *Christian Bioethics* 19, no. 1 (2013): 90-91.

¹⁰ *Job* 7:15-16, as well as 17:1.

¹¹ Saint Basil the Great, *Ὅτι οὐκ ἔστιν αἴτιος τῶν κακῶν ὁ Θεός*, 3, PG 31, 333B.

he endures it waiting for God's redemption. He does not just hope for discharge from pain, but anticipates the absolution of the sins and the eternal life after death.¹² This is the reason why the prayer on deathbed is not limited to the painless death, but also includes the salvation and the enjoyment of eternal life. On the contrary, the request for euthanasia is based on the belief that life is meaningless under the burden of illness and pain, that there is no longer hope and the patient has lost his dignity and therefore, what is actually left for him is a painless, free and dignified death.¹³

IV. Closing Remarks

Based on the above we can we can draw the following remarks:

a) The Church fully understands human agony regarding the end of life and shares the desire for a peaceful death. Actually, the inclusion of this request in the Divine Liturgy reveals the importance that is attributed to the end of life. And the prayer on deathbed, by which God is asked for redemption of the disease with the advent of death confirms the positive view of the desire for painless death. The human being by nature does not want to suffer pain and the orthodox theology does not hesitate to classify pain as "natural evil" as it is experienced by man as something unpleasant and bad. Meanwhile, by praying for the relief of pain the pedagogical significance and its benefit for the spiritual life is underlined, since pain brings out the frailty of human nature, restrains vanity and selfishness and helps man to achieve humiliation and repentance granting salvation. This understanding of pain as "natural evil" contradicts with the true evil, which is sin. Thus, while Church prays for the avoidance of pain, the healing of the sick and the painless death, honors in the same time the painful death of the martyrs, who endured pain and sacrificed their lives for their faith in Christ.

b) The fact that with the prayer on deathbed the painless death of the patient is requested reveals that the extension of life should not be considered as an end in itself or something to be achieved by any means or price. The exhaustion of every means for the longest possible extension of life, even if it is diametrically opposed to the decision for euthanasia, has as a common characteristic human's desire to define the end of his life.¹⁴ Besides, according to the Christian teaching, life is not complet-

¹² Miltiadis Vantsos, *Το Επιστημονικά Εφικτό και το Ηθικά Ορθό: Προσεγγίσεις Ορθόδοξης Βιοηθικής* (Thessaloniki: 2016), 165.

¹³ For more on euthanasia from the point of view of orthodox ethics see Christodoulos Paraskevaidis, *Νεώτερες Απόψεις περί της Ευθανασίας* (Athens: 1986); Georgios Mantzaridis, *Χριστιανική Ηθική*, vol. II (Thessaloniki: 2003), 653-660; Apostolos Nikolaidis, *Από τη Γένεση στη Γενετική: Εγχειρίδιο Βιοηθικής* (Athens: 2006), 236-262; Miltiadis Vantsos, "Euthanasie als Sinnfrage von Leben und Tod", *Orthodoxes Forum* 15 (2011): 173-179; Miltiadis Vantsos, "Η Αφαίρεση της Ζωής: Ο Βιοηθικός Προβληματισμός στα Ζητήματα της Έκτρωσης και της Ευθανασίας", *Πνευματική Διακονία* 4 (2011): 42-52; Konstantinos Kornarakis, "Ευθανασία: Ηθικά Διλήμματα Πολιτισμικής Αυτοσυνειδησίας", *Βιοηθικά* 3, no. 2 (2017): 81-94.

¹⁴ Eberhardt Schockenhoff, *Ethik des Lebens: Ein theologischer Grundriß* (Mainz: 1998²), 332-333.

ed in the contact of present, since it is followed by the eternal life after death. For these reasons, the Church does not require the utilization of all medical means for the prolongation of life. As it is pointed out in the text published by the Bioethics Committee of the Church of Greece on euthanasia,

“The use of medical intervention should be extended to the point where the emerging complications and additional problems alleviate the patient’s pain and do not prolong his suffering. God is the one Who allows pain; therefore, it should be neither generated nor intensified by medicine. The prolongation of life and alleviation of pain should coincide with the volition of God; it should not become an end in itself.”¹⁵

c) The prayer on deathbed highlights the importance of the last moments of human life. The patient can pray, ask God for the forgiveness of his sins and for redemption. Furthermore, he can confess, receive the Divine Eucharist, can reconcile with people with whom he had fallen apart, can forgive and be forgiven, can receive love and can teach with his word and example. The last stage of life holds therefore great importance for the spiritual life both for the dying and for his loved ones, so it must be dealt with accordingly.

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¹⁵ The Holy Synod of the Church of Greece, *Basic Positions on the Ethics of Euthanasia* (Athens: 2007), article 48, 26.

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