

## Physicians of the Soul

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*“The guiding of man, the most variable and manifold of creatures, seems to me in very deed to be the art of arts and science of sciences. Any one may recognize this, by comparing the work of the physician of souls with the treatment of the body...”<sup>1</sup>*

With these words Saint Gregory of Nazianzus, the 4th-century Cappadocian Church Father, begins a discourse on the unique role of the spiritual physician, whose practice has similarities with medical physicians, yet greatly surpasses the latter in depth and breadth. Meditating on this theme seems eminently fitting right now, given the situation the world finds itself in. After a year mired down by a pandemic, we have become obsessed with the care and safety of the body, so it is an opportune time to rebalance our perspective by being reminded of matters of the spirit, the lifeblood of the Body of Christ.

The Covid-19 pandemic will long be remembered throughout the world as a time of struggle and sorrow. Many lives have sunk deeper into poverty, many have been psychologically hurt by isolation, and many have died. Everyone is aware of these grave physical and social harms caused by both the virus itself and extensive lockdowns, but what are the spiritual consequences of the pandemic? Much thought and action have been focused on the former, but the Church has only begun to assess the latter. How has the pandemic spiritually affected the lives of Christians throughout the world? Has the Church fulfilled its calling to be “salt and light” in addressing spiritual needs, which are in many ways more critical than physical ones? Has it risen to the challenge, or rather sunk beneath the waves of tribulation?

St. Gregory’s Second Oration, popularly known as *De Fuga*, provides a helpful lens through which we can gain illumination and focus on these questions. He wrote it to provide an explanation for why he fled into solitude immediately after being ordained to the priesthood, and why it was over a year until he returned from his retreat. He had several good reasons for his flight, the first and most important being that he was in

a state of confusion and shock after being ordained suddenly and rather forcefully by his father. However, the last reason he mentions is the most pertinent to our study. Knowing the grave responsibilities and challenges of his new vocation, he felt inadequate to the task: “I did not, nor do I now, think myself qualified to rule a flock or herd, or to have authority over the souls of men.”<sup>2</sup> He was a humble man and knew well his own failings, insisting that one must guard against the desire to “undertake to heal others while [we] ourselves are full of sores.”<sup>3</sup>

After providing an explanation for what he admits was a lapse of judgment in fleeing from the scene, St. Gregory begins a long exposition on the challenging nature and dignity of Christian ministry. He does so by comparing the work of those who seek to heal the body with those whose calling is to heal and nurture the soul. While he affirms that caring for the body is essential and a great good, the healing of souls “is of more consequence, from the nature of its subject matter, the power of its science, and the object of its exercise.”<sup>4</sup> This is so because the former is “mainly concerned with the surface, and only in a slight degree investigates the causes which are deeply hidden. But the whole of our treatment and exertion is concerned with the hidden man of the heart.”<sup>5</sup>

St. Gregory’s point should be self-evident to any Christian who takes his faith seriously, for we all know that our bodies are temporal and will one day dissolve into the earth, while our souls are immortal. Yet in everyday life do we act as if we really believe that the health of souls “is of more consequence” than the healing of our bodies? Do we not in fact far more consistently glorify the medical profession and its practitioners, while thinking little of the spiritual physicians in our parishes and religious communities? I have been surprised during this current pandemic how health care workers have regularly been granted an exaggerated status as heroes for simply doing their job, while religious leaders caring for others have not even been noticed. The latter are insignificant because any contributions they make are viewed as trivial compared to that of the healthcare worker. In the broader context, society increasingly views the Christian Church as irrelevant and useless because while highly valuing material gains and benefits it gives little or no import to the spiritual dimension of the human person. This trend which characterizes

modernity is one that should be of grave concern to us all.

The words of St. Gregory serve to awaken us on this theme by heralding the truth of the matter in comparing physicians of the body with physicians of the soul:

“The one preserves, if it already exists, the health and good habit of the flesh, or if absent, recalls it ... But the scope of our art is to provide the soul with wings, to rescue it from the world and give it to God, and to watch over that which is in His image. If it abides, to take it by the hand, if it is in danger, restore it, if ruined, to make Christ to dwell in the heart by the Spirit—and, in short, to deify, and bestow heavenly bliss upon, one who belongs to the heavenly host.”<sup>6</sup>

The art of the Church is the highest art and also the noblest science, for its aim is nothing less than the complete transformation of the human person, body and soul, into the likeness of God. This task far surpasses that of the physical sciences, as for example the castle designed by an architect surpasses the sandcastle patted together by a child: the former has beauty of form and lasting solidity, while the latter is crude and quickly washes away with the waves. For our earthly days are like flowers that quickly fade and blow away with the wind (Psalm 103.15), whereas our resurrected bodies will live forever. Caring for the body is important and valuable, but even at their best the remedies of doctors are only a temporary fix, whereas working toward the deification of the human person not only far more fully defines what a person actually is—a being of both body and soul—but has eternal consequences.

Therefore, it is important to ask ourselves at this moment of history: to what degree has the Church lived up to this tremendous calling, providing souls “with wings” during the pandemic? Have we been a witness of the paramount value of the spiritual in the midst of the world’s preoccupation with the physical? Have we disseminated the message that the infection of sin is far more serious than Covid-19, for it destroys the person’s very being, body and soul? And that the greatest cure is Jesus Christ, who “vaccinates” us with the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives? “Therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned

... even so through one Man's righteous act the free gift came to all men, resulting in justification of life" (Rom 5.12, 18). Has the voice of the Church, her gospel message, been heard with clarity and verve during the pandemic? Or has it rather been stifled, if not silenced—overwhelmed by the shouts of those who worship the idol of personal safety above all else. "Be safe!" has become the new mantra of the masses—physical health taking precedence over all other dimensions of human life, including the psychological, economic, and (especially) spiritual. Obvious examples of this skewed focus include the fact that prevalent lockdowns designed to prevent the spread of the virus have created a dramatic rise in other serious problems such as domestic abuse, suicides, and home abortions (via pills), which have been given little attention compared to the frenzy of activity concentrated on preventing the spread of the virus. Furthermore, millions of people have lost their livelihood and sunk deeper into poverty, exacerbating other social problems. Finally, parishes have been closed for months on end, depriving hundreds of millions of spiritual sustenance.

How has the Church responded to these issues, to the often-over-amplified fear pervading public life? Has it been a witness of courage and resilience, of trust in God and the efficacy of prayer, or has it rather by its actions failed to challenge the prevalent attitude that physical health inherently usurps all other considerations about what it means to be human? The world has been living in a pandemic of fear, which in some ways is worse than the virus itself, for it places an irrational emphasis on the safety of the body and thus demeans the dignity of the human person, who at his most noble overcomes the mere instinct for survival. When the mere sneeze of a person sends others scuttling away with alarm, it is a sign that something is not right with either our psyches or our existential point of view.

It seems clear that the Church has sent mixed messages to both the faithful and greater society this past year. (In the following, I speak from my experience in North America, which I acknowledge may be quite different from some other countries.) If the Eucharist is indeed the "source and summit" of Christian life<sup>7</sup>, should parishes ever be closed for weeks or months on end—for *any* reason? Yet in many parts of the world that is precisely what happened, with most bishops readily acquiescing to

State demands. For what reason? Mainly, it seems, to simply cooperate with the authorities for the sake of what has been deemed the “public good,” however debatably restrictions were applied to local parishes. In most locales few bishops made efforts to question or challenge lockdown orders with the goal of keeping parishes open to the faithful. Indeed, some even surpassed the strict measures of the State by requiring their priests to refrain from anointing the sick and providing Viaticum for the dying. As a result, many elderly—who compose the vast majority of those suffering from the virus—died alone and without receiving last rites. In all of this it is important to ask ourselves what the Church is conveying to the world about the nature of the Christian faith. More pointedly, what kind of a “sign to the nations” (Isa 11.12) is the Church being when it withdraws its ministry particularly at moments of great need? If the sacraments are indeed our very lifeblood as Christians, one could use the analogy of a sick patient (which all of us are) having his IV removed at the very moment he is most in need of life-giving fluids. This analogy may seem extreme, however, the closure of parishes created genuine spiritual distress to countless believers, especially daily mass-goers who for the first time in their lives were unable to receive the eucharist for months on end.

Throughout history it has particularly been priests and religious (more than anyone else in society) who risked their own health during pandemics to reach out to the sick and dying with spiritual counsel and the sacraments. And it is important to note that our current pandemic is minor compared to others such as the Black Plague of the 14th century and the Spanish Flu of the early 20th century, which killed exponentially more. Have we become so careful, or perhaps so desirous of public approbation, that we now withdraw from performing the vital ministry of the Church at the first sign of physical risk? Jesus did not come to our world at arm’s length, but rather reached out his arm to touch all of the contagious (of both body and soul), including even lepers who sought his presence and healing. If the Church is indeed the continuation of Christ’s mission, the hospital of the soul, the only place offering eternal sustenance and salvation to the world—a mission far surpassing that of the medical establishment—should it not have been in overdrive during the

pandemic rather than often absent from the life of society? A medical hospital would never close its doors during a public emergency, for to do so would belie its very purpose for existence. Should not the same be said (and even more so) about the Church?

Fear has played far too great a role in society and the life of the Church this past year. It is understandable given our fragile human condition that many are easily frightened about what is unseen and therefore mysterious, especially things like viruses. We are afraid of the dark, of murky water, of diseases, and most potently, death. Our Christian faith, however, provides the vision and strength to overcome such fears. Indeed, the quality of courage has been a distinguishing characteristic of all the saints through the ages, from the confessors to the martyrs. A healthy faith does not run away from the unseen but towards it, for we believe that it is the things of the Spirit, hidden in mystery, that are the very source of our life. And we are confident that God rules the entire cosmos, seen and unseen, with His loving care. St. Paul summarizes this conviction well:

“So, we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.” (2 Cor 4.16-18).

The mission of the Church is to be a witness of hope and faith in the midst of the world’s fear—an example of the hidden power of prayer, of trust that our Sovereign Lord is watching over all that happens. As such, the mantra “Be Safe!” which seems to pervade all communication these days—whether on websites, TV advertisements, or tagged at the end of conversations and emails—should not be the primary refrain of the Christian. Rather we must give voice to biblical words which express the confidence of our hope: “Fear not!” (Lk 12.32), or “Be strong and of good courage!” (Deut 31.6). For “neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 8.38-39).

All of this also raises the question of what St. Paul meant when he exhorted the Church in Rome to “be subject to the governing authorities” (Rom 13.1), for that is of course an important rationale for accepting restrictions on worship and the closure of parishes. The principle is by no means clear cut, for throughout history it has always been necessary for the Church to discern the limits of this teaching. Believers in the early Church under Roman rule obviously did not obey the State regarding its mandate to worship idols, but rather gladly died as martyrs to give witness to their faith in the true God. And despite Communist threats, deportations, and the murder of countless priests and religious, Russian believers under Stalin continued to secretly gather for worship even though it was forbidden by law. The current pandemic by no means compares with those seasons of martyrdom, nevertheless, it highlights two important principles. Firstly, there have been, and always will be, governments that seek to suppress Christian worship because they view it as a negative force in society. Secondly, for Christians’ worship is non-negotiable: participating in the life of the Body of Christ and receiving the precious gifts of His Body and Blood is the very heart of Christianity, and means everything to the faithful. We all agree that Christians are sustained and nourished in their faith by gathering together and receiving the sacraments, but do we consider the opposite true? Are the faithful weakened and even harmed when they are deprived of Christian community and these gifts of the Spirit? To at least some degree, the answer must be “yes,” for “the work of our redemption is accomplished” through the sacred liturgy,<sup>8</sup> the place where we most profoundly commune with our Lord.

All of the foregoing is a presage to what is in the end the most important question: what happens next? Will social distancing and mask-wearing continue to be the norm even when the pandemic threat has subsided? If so, will the Church support such behaviour, even though it has a negative effect on personal relationships and community life? Along those lines, could it become accepted liturgical practice for priests to distribute Holy Communion with disposable gloves and masks, and if so, what would this convey symbolically about the great mystery of the Eucharist? Even more crucially, what has happened this past year raises questions about how the Church will respond to other future challenges that threaten the

good of humanity. For not only new, and potentially more deadly, pandemics will continue to arise as they have throughout the ages, but other threats—arguably even more dire—face the Church and all of humanity. For example, many western governments have begun promoting abortion as a “human right,” and advocating euthanasia as the “alleviation of suffering.” The genetic revolution has led many prominent scientists and cultural leaders to advocate transhumanism, which foresees the integration of technology into the human body and mind. The justification for such developments is the betterment of humanity—indeed, its salvation—yet from a Christian perspective these things pose a grave threat to the very idea of what it means to be human—*imago Dei*, sacred and inherently spiritual beings with lives that extend far beyond this temporal veil. Along those lines, it is important to mention that sickness and death are not inherent evils in the Church’s teaching, and indeed often serve as means of grace and a dramatic witness to the truth of the gospel. One need only consider the powerful testimony of those who are patient and steadfast in suffering, and of course the brave example of the martyrs through the ages, whose blood is the very seed of the Church.

In summary, it must be emphasized that none of the preceding discourse is meant to belittle the contributions of healthcare workers and the improvements in medical science which have saved countless lives and helped all of us be healthier. Rather, it is to focus attention on what is most important: the salvation of souls. For as St. Gregory of Nazianzus reminds us, “the scope of our art is to provide the soul with wings, to rescue it from the world and give it to God, and to watch over that which is in His image”<sup>9</sup>, a task unique to the Church, and one that is of far greater consequence than that of medicine, or any other earthly forms of salvation. Our hope and comfort are ultimately in our Lord Jesus Christ, who frees us from fear and seeks to deify us so that we can participate even in the very life of God for eternity. It is this message which must always be front and centre in the Church, over all other temporal concerns, for it defines the very meaning of “salvation.”

The Covid-19 pandemic has raised many questions about what “faithfulness” and “witness” mean for the Church in its ministry to souls and its prophetic role in society. If St. Gregory is right about the supreme



dignity and worth of the Church's ministry—that spiritual well-being is of inherently greater consequence than physical well-being—then all of us will continue to have many more questions to answer, more prayers to raise, more examinations of conscience to perform in considering the public witness of the Church in the years ahead. Our calling as the Body of Christ will certainly remain a challenge, demanding great love and self-sacrifice:

“We, upon whose efforts is staked the salvation of a soul, a being blessed and immortal, and destined for undying chastisement or praise, for its vice or virtue—what a struggle ought ours to be, and how great skill do we require to treat, or get men treated properly, and to change their life, and give up the clay to the spirit!”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> De Fuga, 16.

<sup>2</sup> De Fuga 9.

<sup>3</sup> De Fuga 13.

<sup>4</sup> De Fuga 16.

<sup>5</sup> De Fuga 21.

<sup>6</sup> De Fuga 22.

<sup>7</sup> Lumen Gentium, 11.

<sup>8</sup> Sacrosanctum Concilium, 2.

<sup>9</sup> De Fuga 22.

<sup>10</sup> De Fuga 28.