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Patriarch Daniel’s message to Bucharest clergy: Pastoral care of the sick is a fulfilment of the Lord’s word and a missionary priority

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His Beatitude Patriarch Daniel delivered a speech on Monday at the opening of the Pastoral-Missionary Conference of the clergy in the Archdiocese of Bucharest, titled “Pastoral Care and Assistance of the Sick is a Fulfillment of the Lord’s Word and a Missionary Priority.”

His Beatitude highlighted the main aspects concerning the pastoral care of those suffering, stating that “it is not merely social assistance for the sick, but also a collaborative effort of the Church members with God towards the complete healing of the sufferer.”

Pastoral care and assistance of the sick is a fulfilment of the Lord’s word and a missionary priority
“Go and do likewise!” (Luke 24:37)

Christ is Risen!

The Holy Synod of the Romanian Orthodox Church has proclaimed the year 2024 as the Solemn Year of Pastoral Care and Assistance of the Sick. Every year, we focus more deeply, spiritually, theologically, and practically on one of the priority themes for the Church’s pastoral care, as we are already accustomed to.

If last year we dedicated ourselves to cultural-social and missionary concerns regarding the pastoral care of the elderly, it is natural that this year we continue this work, deepening more and more, both through words and deeds, the pastoral care and assistance of the sick.

Although illness is an integral part of the human experience, humans cannot become accustomed to it. This is not only because it can sometimes become extremely difficult and severe but also because humans are created for life, for an increasingly fuller life, to which the Risen Christ calls us: “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never

be thirsty” (John 6:35).

Christ is the Lord of life, who frees us from all evil and suffering. When a person faces illness and suffering personally, the words of the Lord resonate even more strongly in their soul: “Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day. For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink.” (John 6:54-55), food and drink for immortality or, as Saint Ignatius of Antioch writes, “the medicine of immortality and the antidote so that we should not die but live forever in Jesus Christ.”

Christ Himself is the medicine, the Holy Eucharist being a remedy not only for the healing of the soul and body but also for the forgiveness of sins and eternal life (see John 6:54).

The healings that the Lord Christ performs are signs of His infinite love. Through these healings, He shows that the Kingdom of God is near to people. These healings are signs that help us understand that the true and deepest disease of humanity is the absence of communion with God, the Source of love. Only communion with God can offer us true healing and authentic life.

Therefore, Christ’s teachings and healings are always united in the most profound form, forming a single message of hope and salvation in His Word from the Holy Scriptures.

In this sense, Saint John Chrysostom writes: “The divine words are a treasury of all kinds of medicines” because the Lord Jesus Christ is the Physician of souls and bodies. He is both a Physician and a medicine (medicus et medicamentus), as Blessed Augustine says.

The priestly ministry has always included the duty of clergy to care for the sick as a fulfilment of the commandment of the Lord Jesus Christ given to His disciples sent to preach: “Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received; freely give” (Matthew 10:8).

Following the example of the Good Shepherd, as guides of the communities entrusted to them, priests must be, as Blessed Augustine emphasizes in a letter, attentive with great joy to the weak, the simple, and sinners, expressing the infinite mercy of God through comforting and hopeful words.

The same Church Father emphasizes, commenting on Psalm 103, that: “God heals all your diseases. Therefore, do not be afraid; all your diseases will be healed […]. You only need to allow Him to heal you and not reject His hands.”

Church servants must care for the soul of any believer, especially when they are suffering or ill. However, pastoral care and assistance of the sick in contemporary society face a series of challenges to which we must find appropriate solutions and implement them within the parishes.

Let us not forget this fundamental truth of our existence:

- We came into the world from the love of our parents.
- We are created to love God and our neighbours.
- We are called to eternal love.

This dimension of the human being must be concretized even more during periods of illness and fragility.

For adequate pastoral care and assistance of the sick, we must consider a series of priorities that help this work of the Church not be merely social assistance for the sick but also a collaboration of Church members with God towards the complete healing of the sufferer:

1. Thus, humble and merciful love represents the first therapy we must practice to heal our society’s ailments. For physical and spiritual healing, the wounds of loneliness and isolation in which the sick often find themselves must first be soothed. The practice of indifference, selfishness, and individualism can only be countered by a culture of compassion and merciful or generous love.
2. Just as the Lord Jesus Christ did not place any burden on anyone but offered His humble and merciful love, that is, His own Person, so must the priest offer support both spiritually, praying for the sick, and intellectually and socially, with increased attention, towards a comprehensive recovery of the sick, both spiritual and physical. The sick have weakened physical integrity and their relational, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual dimensions. In this sense, besides therapies, they expect support, attention, and care, that is, the love of a community that suffers with them, without them directly requesting help, as Saint John Chrysostom guides us: “A clear proof of the boundless goodness of Christ is that He does not wait for the plea of the suffering, but, out of love for people, anticipates their plea.”
3. The Lord Jesus Christ is our primary model for caring for the sick. He gives people the extension of earthly life through His wonderful works, as signs of

the Kingdom; as the Good Samaritan, He came to the almost-dead man “and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine.” (Luke 10:33-34), and through humble obedience unto death, He sacrifices Himself on the Cross to conquer death by Resurrection (see Philippians 2:7).

4. The Lord Jesus Christ, His Mother, and the holy unmercenary healers are the true healers of the sick, often inspiring the work of the physician who treats them. The various healings performed by saints worldwide are recognized as manifestations of a special grace, which they receive as a gift from God and share further, also as a gift.
5. The experience of suffering, where sometimes the sick person falls prey to discouragement and despair, can be transformed, through careful spiritual guidance, into a time of self-examination, a time of repentance, and a return to God, understanding that the Lord Christ came to heal the brokenhearted (Isaiah 61:1).
6. Through the work of the Holy Spirit in the world, especially through the Holy Sacraments, the Church’s servants continue the mission they were sent by Christ to heal and soothe the suffering of countless sick people through numerous healthcare activities that Christian communities put into practice with love, thus showing the true image of God, His love.
7. In this sense, the primary responsibility of the priest is to cultivate within the community the evangelical spirit of ministry to the suffering and to care for the spiritual and physical health of the believers.
8. Issues related to suffering and health, life and death, must be deepened in parish catecheses. It is essential for the priest to help the believers meditate on these major themes and understand that illness is not always the result of sins but is sometimes allowed for the wisdom and testing of the righteous: “It comes – says Saint John Chrysostom – also for the acquisition of an openness to understanding, as God said to Job: ‘Would you discredit my justice? Would you condemn me to justify yourself?‘ (Job 40:8).”
9. The members of believers’ families can identify the immediate needs of their loved ones who are suffering and sick and can support these needs, aiding the priest’s work.
10. The presence of appropriate connections between the hospital chaplain, the patient’s family, and the parish community greatly benefits the patient’s care. Volunteering significantly contributes to the sufferer’s care and must be promoted, supported, and cultivated.

In conclusion, remembering that health is a gift from God and that this gift must be preserved, cared for, and sanctified, and if we have lost it, we must seek it with

much faith and hope, we pray to God, the Mother of God, and the holy unmercenary saints to heal our souls from sins and our bodies from diseases, unto the glory of the Holy Trinity and our salvation.

We bless the opening of the Spring Pastoral-Missionary Conference of the clergy from the Archdiocese of Bucharest, praying to the Holy Trinity to pour out Her rich gifts upon all the servants of the holy altars, strengthening them in their mission.

† Daniel

Patriarch of the Romanian Orthodox Church

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