

Pastoral guardianship of the ill

It is not enough to confess and give communion to the sick only, it is also necessary to support, console and instruct him¹. The sick, approaching death deserves special participation from the pastor. Here the voice of mercy or co-suffering participation expected from the pastor is what the Lord addressed, during His Own life, to those people whom He saw suffering. The pastor of the Church, by the duty of his calling, is a teacher and then an accuser, turning the sinner from his error. The bed of the sick is not the place for both cold dry doctrine and rigid moral lessons, or better than teaching, it is for the message which the mouth of the pastor should always be ready. Here it should mainly if not exclusively become consolation, consisting of one of the components of Christian instruction. In people suffering this or that corporal illness and approaching death, frequently the heaviest spiritual grief² flowing from the past is combined with the painful sensations of the sick bodies, flowing out or from regret about the past, or from fear of the future, or from danger for those close to the heart and so forth. Meanwhile these afflictions can be extremely dangerous for the soul departing to God. Therefore, then the "Hierarch's Lectures" also inspires the priest as a duty "to diligently teach everyone in his flock while they are still living about what may be a good arrangement to die", so in particular the duty is "above all to fulfill this when death already approaches where both weakness of powers and various kinds of confusion and temptations demand special reinforcement of instruction and consolation for the person".

This "reinforcement, instruction and consolation" in every case, under the instruction of the "Hierarch's Lectures" should: 1) be based on faith in Christ the Savior and on the Christian hope of the boundless love of God for us (Jn. 3:1, 12; Rom. 8:31-32, 15-17); 2) be concerned for both a) the past life of the dying, in relation to which one must to the dying "explain that the love of God is not overcome by any of our trespasses, if only we will turn to Him and will truly repent, and that the Heavenly Father lovingly accepts those repenting and turning to Him" and if the dying is still confused in remembering his former sins³, "to assure him that God has absolved and erased all his sins" (Ezk. 18:21-23, 32:12; 1 Jn. 1:9; Ps. 31:15; Lk. 15:21, 19:8, 23:42-43); and b) his present feelings, especially dangerous for the dying is his blind attachment to terrestrial life⁴ which already begins to end, but is why at the bed of the dying it is especially pertinent to also

know the well-placed word about the vanity of contemporary life, about generally the main mission the person is to know, love and glorify God the Creator⁵, and c) the future that the dying awaits, for how much sweet comfort may truly pour into the dying soul, the living image of eternal blessedness prepared for us by love for God to which pious souls aspire with living thirst, the soul of every Christian should also aspire, for which death is merely the way, on which we will not be left without heavenly help, if only we would be worthy of both it and eternal blessedness (Php. 3:20-21; Col. 5:53; Rom. 14:8, 5:8, 17; Mt. 25:34; Lk. 23:46; Jn. 6:54, Jas. 5:14-15); and finally d), relations of the dying for their remaining close to his heart, the Prophet Isaiah was not confused to tell Hezekiah: "set your house in order, for you shall die and not live" (Is. 38:1); it is not necessary to be confused and to convince the pastor of the Church of Christ, even though conditionally merely for the dying "to set his house in order", the success in this persuasion may be from the service of the priest not only for those remaining but also those dying, who, truly, will become calmer, when, as much as he is able, will set his eternal destiny⁶ in order; the special word of consolation, undoubtedly, will be found by the priest for those dying, who, dying, may leave with his one eternal constant only blessing, to bequeath the one hope in the One, Who is a Defender of widows and a Father to orphans, Who carries under His special protection those naturally lacking, given by birth defenders and nourishers, and he better sets his destiny than as builds her natural trustees, as the proof of those many examples serve, the priest also needs to feed and maintain this hope first of all in the most unfortunate dying person (Pastirskoie Bogoslovie [Pastoral Theology], § 121).

The pastor should apply special care to the truly Christian frame of mind of the dying. People, generally inclined during their lifetime to be directed more by ambitious and mercenary motives, quite often even in the last, sacred and awesome minutes of life wish to remain faithful to them. Others manage to suppress, as it seems, in themselves worldly attachments and inclinations and to cause a penitential mood in them. But at the heart of such mood often lies not so much consciousness of one's own sins and the depth of the insult of Divine justice, how much fear before expecting the unrepented punishment beyond the grave, therefore, the same ambitious beginning which operated earlier even in their earthly devotedness. One of the hardest and at the same time the most important duties of the pastor consists in awakening true, instead of hypocritical repentance of a dying soul; repentance, based not on the fear of the judgment of God, but on

the love for the Divine truth trampled down by our sins. The attention of the dying should be directed to keep all measures on the consciousness of these realities. The consciousness of his sinfulness, faith in Divine love, hope in His mercy, is more sincere and not hypocritical desire "to be forgiven and be with Christ" is such a mood in which each of us should leave the earthly life and which will be especially difficult to hold and keep in itself in the last minutes of life, during a so-called death agony, when all the evil powers and temptations uncontrollably aspires to seize the weak dying consciousness and to subordinate him to themselves as a spiritual being, when the many sinful memories rise again before him and besiege him, then making him terrible thirsty for earthly life and its pleasures, then plunging him into full hopelessness and despair.

There are beautiful instructions concerning the behavior of the priest in these awesome minutes of agonal struggle given by Archbishop Plato in "the Reminder to the Priest about his binding during the administration of the Mystery of Repentance".

"If the confessor notices that the patient is found already at the life's end, then having removed everyone, he is able to stimulate him or to raise in him sinful memories, he should charge his soul to the Lord, according to the order of the church, and after this quietly and not in a pitiable voice, not swiftly, but serenely, with some intervals, to whisper in his ear a short expression of lamentation, for example, O Jesus, have mercy on me! O sweetest Jesus, save me! O Jesus, I believe in You, I hope in You, I love You. O Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world, have mercy on me! O All-holy Lady Theotokos, save me! O all the Saints, help me! O Jesus, receive my spirit from this world and so forth. There is no need to remind all those present to do and it is good, a prostration, the general prayer for one finding himself in the anguish of death, especially, if this anguish of death continues for very long, so that Jesus Christ allows the patient to die as He Himself has died.

What consolation is raised showing those present then in the room of the dying when all near, remaining on earth, pray together with the priest! Here is the temple of God. Here is Christ among His disciples. Here is sincere prayer with tears and sighs. Here is feeling of compassion, holy and pure. Here are human hearts united, forgetting that there is no time for them to be divided. Everyone

prays and cries. For the purpose of consolation of the sick and maintenance in him of a true Christian mood, the pastor may turn to the Holy Scripture and read from it very comforting and encouraging passages. For nowhere in the Bible is the sound as sweet and divine as in the room of the sick. Nowhere in the Psalms are the conversations of the Savior in John's Gospel and in the images of the blessed condition of the just, found in the Apocalypse, represented as clearly as the voice of God Himself coming down from heaven, as at the bed of the sufferer on the threshold of death. This is such a time when nothing else but the eternal words of God Himself appear valid, for they are the spirit and life" (Reminder to Priests, Part 2, pp. 292-293).

Everything that the priest says during such a time should concern the Christ. "He should approach the sick for Him, meet Him in the sick, preach about Him, speak about Him, turn everyone to Him, for Him to comfort, to challenge, instruct and to console" (Soch. Innokentia, Ep. Penzenskago [Works of Innocent, Bishop of Penzensky, part 2, p. 509).

But also in this case it should be applied to the circumstances. For the knowledge of the sinner who has become hardened in his impiety, he should speak differently about Christ than he would to a pious person, but at the same time firmly to both, impressively, though also tenderly. Great wisdom is necessary here. He should never humiliate the moral worthiness of the person, but at the same time he should point out to him his lacks and to excite in him the need for the highest, more perfect righteousness. The talk of the pastor to the sick should really be the preaching of the Gospel, its hopes and threats, its promises of commandments, the preaching of repentance and the forgiveness of sins, the approach of the dread judgment seat and kingdom of God. These great truths should be proclaimed in a short, few simple words and whenever possible in the same words same of the Gospel. In a word, the problem for the pastor is to present Christ to the spiritual visage of the sick, as a unique support and calming of his sick and sinful soul. (For more details, see Rukovodstvo dlia Sel'skikh Pastyrei [Manual for Village Pastors] 1892, 6-8).

Certainly, it is impossible to list all the possible ways in which the pastor of Church may comfort the sick and work on the encouragement of his spirit. It is only possible to plan a way, as the pastor should go, if pastoral love calls him to

show compassionate participation to his ill spiritual son. Here necessary and awaited from the pastor are not common words, not foreign ones prepared beforehand by whatever manuals, but the voice of the heart. This voice should come from the soul, full of compassion for the sick and pierced with the love of Christ. The personal interchange of the pastor with his spiritual son or spiritual daughter, acquainted with their mood and needs, surrounding circumstances will give living practical content to this voice. A good heartfelt arrangement of the pastor for the sick will by itself gratify the language of instruction, which will pour down power and vigor to the soul overwhelmed with afflictions during the days of bodily illnesses. It is self-understood that the consolation or, generally, instruction should be offered the ill by the pastor in the form of a simple, friendly or fatherly conversation. A solemn, stately and official tone is not in place here. A simple conversation at the bed of the sick is not the same as a sermon, spoken from the church cathedra before a large audience and prepared beforehand. Having begun with a short inquiry about the illness, its origin and character, he may guide the talk to the spiritual condition of the sick, and ask him about how "he endures the sufferings, what he thinks, and what occupies him, while lying on the bed of illness. And here in the beginning from this simple and natural conversation can imperceptibly pass to what, in this case by the consciousness of the pastor, is most needed for good religious-moral influences on the sick. During such a simple sympathetic conversation, the sick person will open his soul, and his openness will show the pastor those points to which he should pay attention and those positions to which he should direct his words⁷.

The pastor of the Church cannot and also should not be averse to the matter of external oversight of the sick. Christian love should induce him as the father and the brother of the flock to offer the sufferer everything that he has laid out for the easing of his affliction and to show his sympathy in practice⁸. Finally, the pastor and medical assistance can render help to the sick. As an educated person, he has more knowledge and the best means for the struggle against our bodily illnesses than the majority of our rural population committed to his spiritual direction. Without interfering in another's area, he may, on the basis of his known experience, give useful hygienic advice, may specify those simple measures and medicine, which may be used in rural life for first aid for the sick.

Our sentimental humanity establishes a canon whenever possible to banish the idea of death from the sick and to put his false hopes to sleep even when his situation is hopeless. Pastors quite often think that it is not necessary to confuse those dying with thoughts about death. But the server of the church should be above this lulling humanity to sleep, frequently responding with levity. God knows whether this false compassion always comes without major harm for the dying, misleading the person in the last minutes of life which, maybe, could be used for the good of the soul. The flattering deceit in this case may sooner be a matter of cruelty instead of love. Worthy preparation for transition to the future life is necessary. The last order or organization of his affairs is desirable for the patient and frequently it is very important for the survivors. And would he be guilty before God and before conscience on those false comforts that will prevent the ill to properly execute their last debt? In particular, would the pastor of the Church, during his high service, during his words in the name of God, incur this fault? Even, if associates of the patient also asked the pastor to support doubtful hopes of recovery in the patient, his duty is to evade participation in artificial seduction, and, to the contrary, to bring home to him the gravity of his condition⁹. However, to say directly just as Isaiah told Hezekiah: "Set your house in order, for you shall die and not live" (Is. 38:1), is hard and bold of the priest. Much better is the middle way to lead the sick to think of the possibility that he is near the end and to conduct his affairs so that he himself sees the approaching danger. For this purpose, without completely taking away hope, it is possible to specify in the waning of powers, in the strengthening of unhealthy signs, to the ever possible turns for the worst. At sympathetic hints of caring love of the pastor, the patient himself will come to that conclusion about gravity of his condition, which seems so rigid in one's own form, and the thought for preparation for the future life will be included into his consciousness and will induce him to those actions, which are so important and essentially necessary for everyone, who wishes for a worthy image to meet death, awaiting all of us. But it is best of all for the pastor to in advance get his flock accustomed to the thought of death¹⁰, then it will not be necessary to hide from the dying that they die or speak to them covering this, and it is not necessary for the affliction of the soul to see those unprepared off to eternity. (Pastirskoie Bogoslovie [Pastoral Theology], §121; Sluzhenie sviashchenika [Service of the Priest], pp. 264-267).

¹ According to the moral condition of the sick, which more or less should be known to the father confessor, or which is revealed to him while visiting the sick, is the pastor of Church sometimes forced, except for consolation, to give the sick instruction and exhortation? On the conscience of the sick may be such important transgressions, for example: heavy insults carried against another, enmity and quarrels with relatives, neighbors, acquaintances, scornful relationship to the consecrated Church Typikon and subjects, enthusiasm for what is either immoral or in an antireligious direction and so forth. During the shock of the sick, undergoing the presentation of the possibility of near death also clears up and revives in the person the deadened religious feeling and the conscience becomes especially sensitive and impressionable. To make use of the favorable minutes for moral actions, to remember the requirements of faith and Christian love and to incline the sick to the fulfillment of these requirements is the plain duty of the pastor, zealous for salvation and the sincere blessing of his flock.

Let the pastor with a glad hand lead the sick with a softened spirit to the way of repentance and good decisions. Let the Christian spirit of love, forgiveness and reconciliation with everyone in particular those at enmity with him be cast over him. And let the cleansing the soul of stains, its saddening, enable in it a quiet approach to the stage awaiting us after swimming in the rough everyday seas (Sluzhenie sviashchenika [Service of the Priest], pp. 267-268).

² At the sight of impatience of the sick, in particular from a long-term, the pastor of the Church will naturally express compassion for his situation, but, declaring this compassion, he will test the heart with words, submissive to God, to sweeten, as far as possible, the bitterness which has collected in the soul of the sufferer, to suppress in him the explosions of abuse ready to slip out from him, and to instill reconciliation in his disordered soul. For this he will point out to him that God does not omit His mercy and those whom he visits with temptations, but is always close to them, and their patient enduring of the suffering sent down upon them draws His merciful eye to them, that, according to the Scriptures, "for whom the Lord loves, He disciplines, and chastises every son he receives" [Pr. 3:12]. Never say to the sick, enduring his illness with difficulty, that he angered God more than others. But he may remind him, that every person has sins and faults, and, maybe, the Lord, here subjecting the sick to suffering, wants to cleanse him as gold in a hearth that, having undergone temptation, he becomes purer and worthier of the inheritance of the highest blessings promised to us. It is hard to suffer, but it is even worse to be thus indignant and lose one's soul even though this suffering increases even more. It is necessary to remember that "he who endures to the end is the one that will be saved" and that steadfast, uncomplaining patience is a sign of a lofty soul, powerful to obtain the benevolence of God. The sick, in the minutes of melancholy, is ready to consider himself the most unfortunate of all and thinks that nobody endures such suffering that he bears. He needs to present examples of such sufferers who patiently carried heavier trials, whose sufferings were even lengthier and crueler. It is useful for him to remember that everyone has his cross, and we, maybe, are under a delusion, when we consider our cross greater and heavier than what befalls to the lot of others. Together with the Apostle, such should properly remember the patience of Job, who lost everything and endured horrible illnesses and what this patience has crowned has crowned for that end; for the Lord is very merciful and co-suffering (Jas. 5:11). Similar to Job many other sufferers are presented by history, but we, as the Apostle says (Jas. 5:11), glorify all those who endured (Sluzhenie sviashchenika [Service of the Priest] pp. 261-262).

³ Proud pharisaic self-conceit is dangerous in the matter of salvation; but it is not less dangerous than uneasy overwhelming despair. The devil, as St. Macarius says (Sermon 7, Ch. 2), often raises in the sinner the memory of former sins, "although to bring the sinner in despair" (Pouchenie sviatitelem [Instructions for Hierarchs]). While seeing the attacks of that despair, the pastor of the Church with all his power should encourage the fallen spirit, pointing out that sin is not present, conquering the mercy of God. That the Lord, who willingly shed His blood for the expiation of human sins and for the reconciliation of the truth of God with us, will not allow His creation be lost, so expensive for Him, if only the latter would desire to undertake a hand for its extraction from the nethermost depths. That the mystery of repentance expiates all our nasty sins, when we search for its grace, and that the Lord, forgave the thief, the publican and the harlot, at which with the strict condemnation of their associates, and granted them paradise, will not reject His children now turning to Him, already redeemed by Him from the dark authority, and so forth. For the soul of the faithful of similar representation, strengthening the authority of the attending server of God, will undoubtedly serve as true comfort.

⁴ In whom the feeling of attachment to this life speaks too strongly, that it is not necessary to condemn this feeling. But for easing of intense power of this feeling, the overburdened person during the minutes of dangerous illness, it is useful before such from the Christian point of view to illumine that path with which we continue throughout our way of life. Let the pastor openly expose how the multitude of cares burden each of us on this way, as many meet unpleasant disappointments, as also his true pleasures are rare and short-term for him. Let us remember, what estimate we gave to everything that we bear and what we pursue in life, divinely inspired men (Job, 7:1-3; Ecc. 1:2, 14; 2:11, 15, 19, 21, 23), all experienced in their time (Sluzhenie sviashchenika [Service of the Priest], p. 260).

⁵ "For the achievement and preservation of these blessed conditions, often the weakness of our body also interfere, which for many needs are subject to much innumerable evil dangers (Rom. 7:23-24). Let us thus always see, as our life is subject to unknown, vague and sad circumstances. All pleasantries in sorrow are swiftly addressed, as all human glory close to changing, all consolations threaten with afflictions" (Pouchenie sviatitelem [Hierarchical Instructions]).

⁶ However, the father confessor should not at all be persuasive with his own advice during the application as the testator of his own will. He can approach with his advice, when the sick asks for his instructions or when he sees in his last will an infringement of justice, an insult to someone or, oblivious to something important or a whim, inclined to give money on something little useful, to the detriment of other more important and essential purposes, generally something such that can generate trouble and subject the name of the testator to condemnation. In the advice of the pastor, during the expression of the last will by the testator, if for them a place opens, it also should not be the darkness of self-interest or predilection. In them only the voice of truth and Christian love should be heard. The last will of the person should be so with them, in order that this has not served "for a prejudgment of a sanctified order" and in order that from any side the influence of the pastor on the testator did not raise up a righteous grumble, but all well-intentioned people admitted what was valuable and salutary (Refer to Pouchenie Sviatitelskoie [Hierarchical Instructions]).

⁷ Obviously that conversation of the pastor with the ill cannot be long. Conversation for the sick that is more or less long may be fatiguing. In attention to the condition of the sick, prudence of the pastor requires him to reduce the time of his conversation with the sick, so that long talks will not tire him. If he sees the need and motive to declare his more pastoral care about the moral situation of the sick, he can visit him a second time for a second conversation with him, perhaps even a third, but not to try to exhaust and offer him all the time, that may serve for his serenity and edification. For those able to read and have the power, he can recommend good reading which may occupy his soul and to give it the edification respective to its condition and inquiries. In particular people, with a long time possessed disease, miss and grieve their difficult inactive condition. Good reading for them is a great consolation. Filling time, it distracts their attention from their gloomy thoughts and the feelings raised in the sick, and gives food to the soul, strengthening it.

⁸ He may through those close to him or to the sick person to send what is necessarily required for the sick, if that is what he has in the house under his cognizance. But the main thing in the view of others known to him, he may have good deeds for the help of the sick and for the easing of his condition. Another thing, having the possibility to do something good for the sick, he may specify for his needs and with assistance of others to facilitate the difficult situation which has fallen to his share. However, there would be merely a desire and diligence to help the ill. And without indications from his side, he finds the means and ways for rendering to the patient that assistance he needs.

⁹ Understandably, the pastor should not upset the sick in vain and his inner exaggeration of the danger of his condition by a resolute prophetic tone to the answer of a question on the recovery of the sick and with full veracity to speak to him about the nearness of his death. The pastor in answer to the question turned to him: will the sick recover? may only point out that the Lord rules over life and death, that He can raise up people recognized as hopeless by representatives of the medical arts from the bed of illness, that prayers of faith may maintain and

continue the life which is extinguishing in the ill, as we see this in the example of Hezekiah (4 Kg. 20:2-7). But, illumining this with rays of hope of the thought of the patient and his associates, the server of the Church should remind them that the judgments and decisions of God are not known to us, and none can tell when the Lord will call for this or other servant to Himself and, consequently, it is always necessary to be ready to also turn over one's life into the hands of God, always to reasonably arrange one's affairs and one's home, when, under the pretext of illness, is sent the impressive explanation of God and a reminder of the fragility and weakness of our vital forces. If the patient is presented directly as hopeless, then it is unworthy of the priest to tempt his vain hopes and to remove from him any thought of death (Sluzhenie sviashchenika [Service of the Priest], p. 265). However, according to the opinion of some (see Prakticheskoe Rukovodstvo dlia Sviashchenno Sluzhitelei [Practical Manual for Church Servers], p. 268) if the patient, enduring a death agony, does not know that this is his last suffering on earth, then neither the priest nor the associates of the patient should speak to him about his agonal struggle in order not to confuse him. The deepest silence must rule at the bed of the dying, and all associates, in these as many afflictions and as many dominant minutes, should be directed to God with prayerful sighs about dying (4 Kg. 2:5). And if here those present cannot be kept from bitter tears and crying, then the priest should authoritatively ask them to leave them the bed of the dying.

¹⁰ The fear of death is peculiar to people who do not have hope and is not worthy of a Christian. If the natural fear of death in the person is found sensitive wishes and representations, then those loftiest concepts, as given us in the reading of Revelation, are powerful to spread this dark fear. It is merely necessary that these bright concepts from the book have gone into the heart of the person and have become an internal attribute of his soul.

*S. V. Bulgakov, "Handbook for Church Servers", 2nd ed., 1274 pp. (Kharkov, 1900) pp. 1066-1071.
Translated by Archpriest Eugene D. Tarris on June 20, 2012 © All rights reserved.*