

From Quality to Sanctity of Human Life: An Orthodox Christian Perspective

In the First Century AD, Seneca stated that “living is not good, but that living is well. A wise man lives as long as he *should*, not as long as he *can*...He will always think of life in quality, not quantity.” Seneca’s philosophy and self-imposed death, that was enacted to avoid possible torture by Nero, enthused the people of his time, providing the ancient world with a model of self-possession and autonomy. The degree that one agrees with Seneca’s statement will reflect how much one has adopted a liberal cosmopolitan ethos regarding life and death issues. It expresses the modern concept of self-determination, control and the ethos of personal dignity as self rule, which lies at the root of the liberal cosmopolitan ethos that prevails today.

Seneca’s statement presents us with two basic questions: 1) the question of one’s predominance over life and death situations, related to the “should” and “can” in his statement; 2) the question of the meaning of the quality of life. Both questions take us far and beyond the classic bioethical dilemmas of end of life issues. They have direct relation to the hypostasis of humans and how one interacts with the world around himself or herself, how one sees life in relation to God and eternity and how one participates in the “mystery of life” (i.e the sacredness of man and the sacredness of God).

These questions have led to fruitless debates between apparent “vitalists” and apparent “relativists”. The “vitalists” hold that biological life is good in itself and should be preserved at all costs. The “relativists” argue that life has neither meaning nor worth if it lacks certain capacities or attributes necessary for maintaining self-consciousness and the ability to relate to others. The “vitalists” view is not necessarily associated with a particular religious tradition. The “relativists” associate life with the present and do not have a sense of any “kingdom” that will come.

Along the same line, in today’s secular ethos, the *quality of life* is viewed by most people in relation to one’s individual condition and capacities. Human life is not a “gift” but a possession, governed by the principle of autonomy rather than that of stewardship. Its ultimate meaning resides in the “self” rather than God, void of any transcendent principle. Thus, it centers on the *quality of a condition* rather on the *quality of a relationship*.

This is indeed contrary to the understanding of man in Orthodoxy. The Orthodox Christian perspective of life and death is viewed within the understanding of the personhood of each human – within his or her relationship with God. In Orthodox theology, “personhood” is a primary point of reference because it relates to the Persons of the Holy Trinity. Being created in His image and likeness, we receive our worth by becoming partakers in the personhood of the Triune God: in the way the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit relate to one

another. Becoming “partakers of divine nature” substantiates what sacredness is (i.e. how one becomes holy by partaking of God who is holy). Sacredness is synonymous with holiness. One cannot truly *exist* if he does not participate in this holiness, if he does not strive to achieve holiness. In this respect, there can be no distinction between the “*quality of life*” and “*the sanctification or sanctity of life*”. The only true life that exists is life in the Kingdom of God. In a hymn sung on the last Sunday of Great Lent, we sing that “the Kingdom of God is not meat or drink, but righteousness and asceticism with holiness. The righteous man is he that does mercy all the day long; who delights in the (presence of the) Lord; and walking in His light, does not stumble”. Life is not valued on material gains, just as material gains are not an indication of one’s “spiritual” worth, but true life can only acquire value when it is lived in longsuffering, righteousness and divine grace. Therefore, there is no life outside of this grace, outside of holiness.

The mystery of life cannot be seen separate from the Giver of Life, but because we live in a world that has rejected Life itself, we cannot avoid suffering. *Only in encountering death can we come to the knowledge of the mystery of Life, which is Christ. In this encounter, we will discover the quality and sanctity of life on earth and that which is in heaven.*

Suffering is not just an encounter with human limits and with human finitude, but most significantly with sin and its consequences. Suffering is not a punishment for sin. In Orthodoxy, as opposed to Western Christian theology, suffering is not a result of hereditary guilt but the consequence of Adam’s sin on all of mankind. Because it is not associated with hereditary guilt, one does not have to suffer to be absolved from guilt. Suffering and pain, though, can bring us to our senses and help cure our pride and our passions, help us seek forgiveness and look beyond the immanent death of our bodies. That is why, in Orthodox life, sickness and caring for the sick is always associated with repentance. The ascetical tradition, which pervades in Orthodoxy, clearly expresses the truth that, if one does not encounter suffering and face death on all the levels of human existence, he or she will not come to know the full meaning of life and will not find significance in one’s personhood.

Suffering though is not an end in itself. We were not created to suffer and to die. The petition offered in most Orthodox services in which we ask that we have a “*Christian end to our life, painless, without shame and peaceful, and for a good defense before the awesome judgment seat of Christ*” precisely characterizes a stance before “*end of life issues*”. It also characterizes how we should face all the “issues” (or crises) of life on this earth. To reach a point in our lives where there is no pain and shame, to reach a point of peace, one must enter the ascetic struggle of denying the temptation of pride, that “I” can completely control life and find fulfillment merely in what is immediate and tangible. From the minute that we give up this attempt, we are open to redemption. Redemption can only come if we make our suffering a part of the

suffering of the whole world, taking on the Cross of Christ's suffering and taking hold of His hand so as to be resurrected with Him into His Kingdom.

Medicine outside of this understanding of suffering and redemption falls short of true healing. The problem that faces us today is that medicine tries to control life and to overcome the finitude of this world. It denies the truth that this life, as we see it, is not the only aspect of life in terms of human existence. Modern medicine usually denies the reality that our death leads to resurrection and final judgment. Therefore the postponement of death becomes a goal in itself. Ultimately this reduces the true "*quality*" of existence in that separates the meaning of "*quality of life*" from sanctification.

Christians have traditionally understood that they may engage in medical interventions, as long as these do not impede one's spiritual life. There is also the recognition that medicine should not be used if it significantly distracts us from our life of prayer or brings us to being obsessed with preserving this life. As St. Basil the Great warns, we should avoid "whatever requires an undue amount of thought or trouble or involves a large expenditure of effort and causes our whole life to revolve, as it were, around solicitude for the flesh...." Such uses of medicine are inappropriate, disproportionate, extraordinary, and morally misleading. The postponement of death, the avoidance of suffering, should not become all-consuming projects.

That which is important is often not what one does or does not do medically, but why and how one does it. It is essential that one make medical decisions in order to avoid acting in a way that would be harmful to the patient. Treatment should be withheld or withdrawn because its burdens would cause the patient or others to fall short of the mark of one's spiritual injury. All health care interventions must be given in parallel with care for the soul of the patient. Healers should know that at they are not the ones that control life. Indeed, to quote St. Basil, "To place the hope of one's health in the hands of the doctor is the act of an irrational animal."³⁹ Instead, our final reliance must be on God. We are not obliged to postpone our deaths indefinitely in a highly technologically mediated environment. This would be strange to the Fathers and contrary to St. Basil's warning that medical care should not encompass our lives. In such circumstances, one should allow broken nature, as God wills, to take its course.

Throughout our spiritual journey in this life, we are constantly struggling with our flesh, with our broken nature, in its relation to a life of holiness. "No one bound by worldly desires and pleasures is worthy to approach, draw near or minister to You, the King of glory" (Prayer of the Cherubic Hymn read in Orthodox Liturgies). As we approach the end of our life, this struggle becomes even more intense. The older we get (or the sicker we get), the more we see how our "flesh" fails us and how we are unable to control its decay, regardless how hard we try. The more we see that our material possessions are unable to give us a real sense of significance. Most of us attempt to invest in our flesh and our possessions as an antidote to our suffering, but the more we do this, the more

spiritual suffering we undergo. In this struggle, we constantly experience the tragedy of life, the inconstancy of our existence in relation to truth. At the end of this life, in our final struggle, in our final suffering of the reality, the truth of this world is faced: “Alas! What an agony the soul endures when from the body it is parting; how many are her tears for weeping, but there is none that will show compassion: unto the angels she turns with downcast eyes; useless are her supplications; and unto men she extends her imploring hands, but finds none to bring her rescue. Thus, my beloved brethren, let us all ponder well how brief is the span of our life...Let us ask of Christ, and also His abundant mercy for our souls” (Hymn from the Orthodox Funeral Service).

Our responsibility as pastors is to journey with those in our flock and with all men along the pastures of death, not just at the end, but in every phase of this life. What we must remember though is that, in order to do this, we must encounter the reality of death in every phase of our own lives. In order for us to transform the quality of life as a material entity in to a spiritual reality, we must seek to be bearers of God’s holiness through repentance (*metanoia*). It is in remaining in God’s holiness and seeing ourselves as bearers of His Holy Grace, that we will find our true identity as persons and as care-givers. This is why, in Orthodoxy, we cannot see our role separate from the Eucharist. Our identity and competence is not dependent on any psychological technique. It is dependent on us entering a struggle with our own being and allowing our identity as human beings to be transfigured by Christ’s light, by God’s loving mercy. Many are the saints who, while they themselves were on their bed of suffering in face of death, drew men and women to them because, in their suffering, they were radiant expressions of love.

In closing this presentation, I would like to state that I have presented you with a very short overview of Orthodox thought in relation to what is termed as true “quality of life” and “sanctity” or “sanctification” in light of health care and end of life issues. For all of you that have truly entered the struggle fore-mentioned, you know that there are no real clear cut answers in relation to the mystery of life and death. The only truth is that found in God’s love as shown in the Person of Jesus Christ. He is the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. And “whoever believes in him shall not parish but shall have everlasting life” (John 3:15).

NOTE: The two basic sources used for this paper were:

- The Foundations of Christian Bioethics by H Tristram Engelhardt (Swets & Zeitlinger Publishers, 2000)
- The Sacred Gift of Life – Orthodox Christianity and Bioethics by John Breck (St. Vladimir Seminary Press, 1998)

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