

ADDRESS TO THE CONFERENCE OF THE HELLENIC NEUROLOGICAL SOCIETY IN JERUSALEM

Theophilos III

Patriarch of Jerusalem

Mr Sitzogiou,

The President of the Hellenic Neurological Society

Distinguished Participants,

Dear Friends.

It is an honour to welcome the Conference of the Hellenic Neurological Society to the Holy City of Jerusalem, and the Patriarchate is greatly pleased with the special privilege of hosting this important event at our seminary of Mount Sion. You are committed to the advancement of your scientific discipline, but you also understand the importance of your work for the collective benefit: of humanity. – the Christian faith stakes its claim on two fundamental truths: that humankind is made "in the image and likeness of God, and that God himself redeemed and restored the dignity of human nature when Cod took on our human life in all its fullness in the birth of Jesus Christ.

The Orthodox Church has, since the earliest days of the apostolic community, been concerned with the life of the whole person. The Church understands the human person to be not simply a physical shell that is filled with a soul, but as a unique individual who, in both body and soul, has eternal significance. It is the faith of the Church that, as God

raised Jesus Christ from the dead, so too will God raise all those who sleep to a life in which all creation will be made new for eternity. For just this reason has the Christian faith been called "the ultimate materialism," for we understand that the material, the physical, is of inestimable worth. God has not created us simply to throw us away.

This is clear in the sacramental life of the Church, not least in the mystery of the anointing of the sick. Every year on the Great and Holy Wednesday, the Church blesses oil for the anointing of those who suffer from both spiritual and physical illnesses. When the faithful person is anointed, the priest says:

Holy Father, Physician of souls and bodies, Who sent Thine Only-begotten Son, our Lord Jesus Christ Who healed every illness and delivered from death, heal Thy servant from the weakness that holds his body, of either body or soul, and enliven him by the grace of Thy Christ, by the prayers of the All-holy Lady Theotokos and all the Saints. Amen.

By anointing those who are sick, whether they suffer in body, mind or spirit, the Church is not attempting to compete with medicine. Quite the contrary. In the mystery of the anointing of the sick the Church declares that human suffering has a call on her attention and ministry. The Church also declares that she is united with God in the support and sustenance of suffering humanity. The Church becomes a partner with the medical profession in caring for the sick. It is not God's will that people suffer, and so God gives us special grace and strength to endure the suffering and illness that are an inevitable part of our mortal life. Our Lord himself attended to the sick and the suffering, and has showed us the way. It is interesting to note that the Greek word *therapeia* means both "worship" and "healing,"

Consequently, the Church has always embraced and greatly

valued the medical profession. The Church understands the faithful life of prayer and sacrament to be a necessary part of attention of physicians. Ideally, the ministry of the Church and the work of the medical profession is a collaboration and not a competition: together we can do better work for suffering humanity than we can do on our own. For the gifts that the Church dispenses and the gifts that medicine dispenses come from the same source, who is the God who is good and loves humankind.

The rich tradition of the Church attempts to embody this integrated approach to our human life. Saint Luke the Evangelist is our model. In the East, Christians venerate Saint Luke as an artist, as the painter of the first icon. Once again, in her tradition of iconography, the Church declares her confidence in the ability of humanity to reflect divinity, and in the ability of this world to be a window into heaven. In the West, Saint Luke is venerated principally as a physician. So the Church upholds the honour in which she has always held the medical profession. In one person, then, we have both painter and doctor, artist and scientist, the one who ministers both to the soul and the body. Let us not forget that this same man was also a preacher of the Gospel, and gave us both the Gospel that bears his name as well as the Acts of the Apostles. Saint Luke is therefore himself an icon of the vision of the Church for the integration of medicine, spirituality, and the saving message of the Gospel.

The Holy Scriptures give us important grounding for our understanding of the medical profession. In the book of Sirach we read one of the great tributes to the work of the physicians, and it is worth quoting at some length:

Honour physicians for their services, for the Lord created them; for their gift of healing comes from the most high ... The skill of physicians makes them distinguished ... The Lord created medicines out of the earth, and the sensible will not

despise them... By them the physician heals and takes away pain; the pharmacist makes a mixture from them. God's works will never be finished, and from him health spreads over all the earth ...give the physician his place, for the Lord created him; do not let him leave you, for you need him. There may come a time when recovery lies in the hands of physicians, for they too pray to the Lord that he grant them success in diagnosis and in healing, for the sake of preserving life. (Sirach 38:1-8, 12-14 *passim*)

"For the sake of preserving life." In these words we understand the co-operation that exists between God and the physician: God is the author of all life, and since their fundamental mission is to preserve and enhance life, by extension the physician shares in the creative and sustaining Spirit of God.

One of the great contributions of Byzantine civilization to the world was the hospital, and this is itself testimony to the importance that the Orthodox Church has long attached to the medical profession. Of course the practice of medicine has existed in one form or another since antiquity, but there is clear evidence that the hospital as we have come to understand it in a modern sense was born in the Byzantine Empire.

One of the first such hospitals, the Basileiada, was built by Saint Basil the Great, who wrote to Eustathius the physician in one of his letters: Humanity is the regular business of all you, who practice as physicians. And, in my opinion, to put your science at the head and front of life's pursuits is to decide reasonably and rightly. This at all events seems to be the case if man's most precious possession, life, is painful and not worth living, unless it be lived in health, and if for health we are dependent on your skill. In your own case medicine is seen, as it were, with two right hands: you enlarge the accepted limits of *philanthropiaby* not confining

the application of your skill to men's bodies, but by attending also to the cure of the diseases of their souls. (Letter 189)

In his oration in honour of Saint Basil, Saint Gregory of Nazianzus recounts to us that saint Basil "greeted the sick like brothers:" "Basil's care was for the sick, and for the relief of their wounds, and the imitation of Christ, by cleansing leprosy, not by a word, but in deed." (Oratian 43.63). Saint Basil himself suggested that medical science "represents detachment from what is not: necessary and fulfils that which is incomplete. "He said that medicine is the image on earth of treatment that is intended to bring peace to the human soul and is a "pattern of the treatment pertinent to the soul."

But it was the twelfth-century Byzantine emperor John II Komnenos who endowed the famous *xenon* at the Monastery of the Pantocrator in Constantinople and so changed the course of the history of hospitals and medical care. In his ground-breaking study, *The Birth of the Hospital in the Byzantine Empire*, Professor Timothy Miller tells the remarkable story of the Pantocrator *xenon*. This *xenon* had 50 beds for hospital patients, as well as a home for older men. It was heated, and there were linens on the beds, good lighting and bathing and sewage systems. There was an organized profession of *archiatroi*, *hypurgoi*, and *hyperetai*, and we know also of the existence of women doctors in Byzantium – *the hiatrainai* – long before their emergence in the West.

As the inheritors of this great tradition, the Church continues to emphasise the importance of the healing of the soul. This is our part of the partnership of healing. The theologian Ioannis Romanidis reminds us that "the treatment of the *psyche*" – in other words, the treatment of the essence of what it means to be human – "is at the core of our ...

tradition.”

Neurology is a highly specialized discipline that deals with disorders of the nervous system. Yours is a highly complex discipline, and the arena of your research and clinical work corresponds to the arena that the Church describes as the *psyche*. The Patristic literature has much to say about the *psyche* that corresponds too much that also concerns the profession of neurology. For the Fathers, what we now call the human nervous system was the beater for them of human strength and power as well as the power of the human *psyche*. Just as the body can be well or ill, so too can the *psyche*. In the Patristic literature, of course, it is sin that is the main threat to the health of the human person. In his *Commentary of the psalms* Saint Cyril of Alexandria speaks of a proaponeurosis, a “weakening,” while the Fathers remind us that sin destroys human strength. Saint Cyril of Jerusalem says that sin “burns.” It “cuts” into the very nerves of the human *psyche*, it crushes the “mental” backbone of the *psyche*, and it darkens the light of the heart. The heart is the throne of the soul, and it is God’s Word that energizes the human *psyche* and gives it substance and purpose. The Word of God is the true physician of the heart, and God’s Word became flesh for no other reason than to support our human nature, heal our hearts, restore health to our human *psyche*, and transform us in his strength and stability.

We discover, therefore, that the modern specialty of neurology deals with matters that have occupied the Church since her earliest days as she has sought to strengthen the faithful in “the healing of our souls and bodies,”

Medicine is dedicated to the safeguarding of human health and the well-being of the whole person. The concerns of medicine are not confined to the biological therapeutic process alone, but extend to the whole range of social, cultural and

political concerns. If human health is both a scientific and a religious matter, social, cultural and political forces affect it as well. In other words, just as the Orthodox Church seeks, in her therapeutic ministry by Word and Sacrament, to help human beings grow more and more into God's image and likeness, so does the medical profession, in your therapeutic ministry of diagnosis and treatment, attempt to heal the traumas that affect human lives. In our different but complementary ways, we are both significant reference points for tolerance, respect and the mutual acceptance of all.

The Patriarchate of Jerusalem, the most ancient religious Institution in continuous existence in the Holy Land, has been throughout our history at the forefront of the efforts to ensure the prosperity, reconciliation and progress of the local population. From the ancient hostel and hospital of *Hosiou Sabba* in Jericho and Jerusalem, to the first printing press in Palestine, to the hospitals in the Holy Land, the Patriarchate has always attempted to care for the whole human person and the welfare of those who reside in this region.

Your presence here is a testimony of the partnership of spirituality and medicine that is so necessary in our time as we all seek to proclaim to a world that seems increasingly indifferent to the holiness of life the infinite worth of the individual human person. May God strengthen you in your own work of *therapeia*, and may God bless the work of this conference.

Thank you very much for being here.