

One Priest's Thoughts on Wearing a Mask (based on Patristic writings)

How do we in the Orthodox Church relate to the current public health situation? How do we respond to the fact that many states have recently given orders for wearing masks in public and that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have also now issued a call that everyone in the United States wear a mask in public, basing this call on a growing body of reported evidence that shows masking reduces the chance of person to person infection and so slows the spread of the virus through communities. As many of us have experienced in one way or another, this has become a personal, emotional, political, and, in the realm of religion, including in Orthodox Christian parishes, even quasi-theological, issue as much as, and often more than, it has been a matter of public health. In the midst of this, I would like to say something about it as a medical issue, because that aspect often gets lost in the wider discussions of how best to live together in these circumstances. Wearing a mask is not exclusively a medical issue, but the medical component is fundamental and should be dealt with as such. It seems clear from what the scientific community has been able to discern so far that public mask wearing helps to slow the spread of the novel coronavirus to a certain degree, and therefore limits the suffering of people and the strain on society as a whole, though of course it doesn't completely stop it. I am not, however, going to address this directly from the point of view of medicine itself, since I have no more knowledge of medicine than anyone else who can read readily available medical research with basic understanding but without any medical training. Rather, I will be writing from the perspective of the patristic tradition of the Church, asking how some of the fathers thought about the practice of medicine and the rationality that supports it in relation to the spiritual life, and asking also what we can learn from them at this moment.

I begin with St. Basil the Great's *Long Rules*, which conclude with a consideration of "the art of medicine" (ιατρικὴ τέχνη; *iatrikê technê*). The last chapter of the work, numbered as the fifty-fifth (PG 31.1044B-1052C; translation available in Wagner, *Saint Basil: Ascetical Works*), begins with the question of whether or not using the procedures and prescriptions of medicine is appropriate for a person pursuing the spiritual life. By "medicine", Basil here means everything that pertains to the health of the body – dietary regime, surgeries, cauterizations, medicines (φάρμακα; *pharmaka*) –, and he seems himself to have studied the medical arts as practiced in the 4th century Roman world: his friend St. Gregory the Theologian said of him, "Medicine, the result of philosophy and hard labor, was rendered necessary for him by his physical delicacy and his care of the sick" (Or. 43.23). The fact that he addressed the question of whether a devoted Christian should submit to medical treatment or engage in disciplines intended to support the health of the body indicates that there was an opinion amongst some Christians that they shouldn't. I think Basil's way of addressing this question is instructive and could be particularly illuminating in our current situation.

He begins by saying that all of the arts of human culture – agriculture, making clothes, building, as well as medicine – have been given by God to help us in the weakness of our nature. Human society, he says, requires more than the earth provides of itself (he is obviously thinking within the context of a world of settled towns and cities), so God has given us the knowledge and understanding to exercise the art of cultivating crops. We are in need of protection from the weather because of the relative frailty of our bodies, so we have been given the art of making clothes and likewise the art of building. This, according to Basil and other fathers, is part of God’s merciful dealing with us now that we are living outside of Paradise, where such arts would not be needed. Gregory the Theologian taught that “from the beginning” the first human being was “naked in his simplicity and life without artifice (ζωῆ ἄτεχνω, *zôê atechnô*; Or. 45.8), using the same basic concept here, *technê*, “art”, as Basil uses to describe the various aspects of human culture that help us in our relative weakness. Commenting of this phrase from St. Gregory, St. Maximus the Confessor wrote a few centuries later that the forefather Adam

“lived without artifice,” and in this way he kept the natural bodily vigor that had once been fully given to him from dissipating. Moreover, he existed without the need for covering, for he had no concept of shame because he was possessed of internal freedom from passion and because he was not subject to cold and heat, for it is this subjection that makes man devise forms of shelter such as houses and clothing. (Amb. 45, PG 91.1353A-B).

These fathers contemplate human nature in Paradise as a way of understanding our current condition. Because we are subject to an environment that is often too much for us to bear on our own, we are, again quoting Maximus, “concerned with the basic principles of the arts in order to provide for the needs of life.” We are in the position of having to use our rational faculty (*logos*) to discern the principles (*logoi*) of the arts that can help us live. Part of being human, in the way that we are human, in the world, as it is, is learning how to live intelligently and humbly with the various arts we have been given by God. The arts are artificial, but they are beneficial when used rightly for the sustenance of life. That is the part we play, while life as such depends absolutely on God.

To return to Basil, the art of medicine in particular has been given by God as a means of giving help to those who grow sick in our hard environment, and Basil himself, as we’ve seen, was actively involved in such care. Basil does not, however, reduce the meaning of life to physical health and indeed is critical of those who put all their hope even for their physical health on medicine alone, for it is ultimately the wisdom of God and His providence that allow for our bodies to be well. Nevertheless, he says, even if some misuse medicine or misunderstand its role in the spiritual life, usually through obsessive concern for the flesh, we should not “repudiate all the advantages to be derived from it,” just as we would not abandon the arts of cooking or making

clothes simply because there are those who are decadent in their use of them. To do so, he says, is “the sign of a contentious nature.”

In fact, just as illness can be for our spiritual instruction, “painful therapy” can itself also be a part of that instruction. As such, “right reason (ὁ ὀρθὸς λόγος, *orthos logos*) indicates that we should not demand an exemption from” difficult medical remedies, whether they be surgeries, cauterizations, bitter medicines, challenging dietary regimes, abstinences and so on. We could say, then, that a person who is *orthodoxos* is also *orthologos*; right worship and right doctrine are bound up with right reason. The art that has discovered and is able to use such things is a gift from God for the healing of the body but also, and more profoundly for Basil, for the healing and instruction of the soul, and here is where our consideration of Basil’s teaching comes to its most significant aspect.

The endurance of suffering in sickness and in treatment can train a person in virtue and lead a person to gratitude for recovered health, but Basil teaches that the very fact of illness and health itself has been given as a model for understanding the whole dynamic of spiritual life. That a sick body can be returned to health through both the tangible means of medicine and through the hidden grace of God can give us hope for a similar transformation of our souls in their weakened state. Just as the body can be healed by observing the principles of medicine, choosing what is healthful and following the prescriptions of doctors, so can the soul be healed by analogous means – and sometimes even by the same means, through a restrained diet, for example – in the course of the spiritual life. According to the saint, the ways of bodily medicine are images of the ways of the spirit, and so we should ask ourselves what the current public health situation reveals to us about the nature of spiritual life.

In response to this question, I would submit that anything I can reasonably do to preserve or improve the health of my neighbor is an act of love that gathers all the particularities of the specific circumstance in which I act on behalf of another and opens them to the presence of the Kingdom of God, to the presence of Christ. This includes something like the preventative medical practice of wearing a mask to limit my potential for spreading this virus to others and so endangering them, a virus I may be carrying unknowingly for a time before getting sick myself. This is not only justified for the sake of physical health and therefore an act of kindness and love to my neighbor; it is also a profound general expression of self-restraint and even sacrifice, however minor, for the good of another. Basil might say, for example, that this restraint of what physically proceeds from my mouth, which could be damaging to another person’s health, is an image of restraining potentially noxious and damaging words on the spiritual plane.

Having said that, we in the Orthodox Church should be extremely sensitive to the notion of covering a face, we for whom the faces of Christ, the saints, and one another are our constant experience of revelation. It is a serious thing to obscure my face in the presence of another and to ask another to do the same. We are depriving ourselves and each other of something essential to our humanity for a time, and we should not easily dismiss that fact. But neither should we dismiss the call to bear one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ (Gal 6.2), to do nothing, insofar as it is in our power, that would wound our neighbor or cause him to stumble (Rom 14.13). The Apostle Paul tells us that the form of this world is passing away, that those of us who have dealings with the world must be as those who have no dealing with it (I Cor 7.31), and it is this freedom from the form of the world, even as we live in it and do indeed have dealings with it, that allows us to act with prudence at a time when the health and possibly even the lives of our neighbors are more at risk. We do this not out of fear or out of an obsession over physical health, still less out of subservience to worldly interests and restricting modes of thought, but out of love for our neighbor and care for her well-being, physical and spiritual, because we know that these are inseparable. To disregard my neighbor's body is to sin against the depths of my neighbor's spirit. I limit myself and chasten my sense of what I want, my sense of freedom, for the sake of doing what is in my power to keep another person well. I even accept the trial of not seeing and not being fully seen face to face, which is the scriptural image of friendship – to speak to one another face to face (Ex. 33.11) – for the sake of preserving another person's health, not because a person's physical health is ultimate but because caring for one another reveals the Kingdom of God and draws it to us.

Perhaps I am being taught in this that I have somehow made myself unworthy to see the image of God so readily, that I fail to take seriously that I am surrounded by the image of God in each person, and especially as it is revealed face to face. Perhaps I have been careless with my brother and sister, have used them for my own ends, and need to be corrected, healed, through a difficult treatment. Perhaps my words need to be chastened, perhaps my posture towards others needs to be moderated, made more modest, so that I respect the mystery of the other person. Perhaps this remedy of covering myself to protect others has been given, yes, to protect them from possible disease, but just as profoundly to heal me of my own blindness and carelessness through the hard discipline of covering my face and enduring the covering of others for a season.

It is of the essence of the Gospel to take on a burden for the sake of someone else, and it is quite striking and unexpected that such a basic act of personal discipline, one that is not primarily intended for my sake (though it is also that), but for the sake of my neighbor, known or anonymous, should be put forward as a universal practice in a society that tends towards the very opposite disposition. Those of us who are rejecting this practice in the name of "religious freedom" should ask ourselves which religion we are seeking to practice

freely, because it would appear as though a flat rejection of the practice is an insistence on our freedom to act contrary to the Gospel, a rather problematic insistence on the part of Christians. It would be, in fact, an indication that our fidelity is not to the way of Christ, the way of the cross, the way of sacrificing love, but rather to the basic spirituality of worldliness as it is consistently revealed in our society: the instinctive disregard for another person when that person's presence calls me to draw back myself and my desires, my sense of what I should be able to do, so as to give space for the other. It is to our shame if the world shows itself to be more willing to take on a minor trial for the sake of the well-being of others than are those who claim to follow Christ. Far better for us to heed the words of St. Maximus again:

As long as this whole universe is subject to destruction and change, and we are clothed with a body of lowliness (Phil 3.21) and are rightly subjected to the various evils that come from it because of our inherent weakness, let us not be lifted up against each other because of the inequality that besets us, but rather let us think intelligently about the unevenness we see in our common nature, which admits of no degrees of honor in itself, and rectify it by making up for the deficiencies in others with what we have to offer. (Amb. 8, PG 91.1105B)

Maximus is thinking primarily of the care for the materially poor, but the principle goes beyond that, for we are all poor in the deepest sense, vulnerable to the changeability of the world, which includes disease and the temptations to grief and despair that come with it, so this life of ours outside Paradise must be one of caring for one another, of doing what we can do for the sake of one another. All of our actions for one another are limited and relative, they do not guarantee anything of themselves, but they all, when done in love, have within them the seeds of redemption.

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