

An Orthodox Understanding of the Human Body

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Introduction

Thank you. It's an honor to be here and to take part in this very important conference. I'd like to start things off by focusing on the unique Orthodox teaching concerning the human body.

As we will see, the Orthodox Church holds the human body in the highest esteem. There is no Christian denomination, no religion of the world, nor any philosophical teaching, that honors the human body with such high regard as does our Orthodox Church.

Our body plays a fundamental role in our spiritual lives. How we view, and what we do to, our body can lead either to our salvation in Christ, or to our

separation from Him. Our Church's stance on many moral issues must be considered in light of her teachings regarding the inherent potential that our body has for sanctification, for holiness, and ultimately, for the resurrection that awaits us all. This great respect for the body is a major factor in many of our Church's ethical teachings relating to sexuality, suicide, abortion, and cremation, to name a few.

Amid the ever-changing views of what it means to be human, the teaching of our Orthodox Church is especially relevant for today. We must not limit our body only to this earthly existence. We should look at the human body, especially our own body, in light of its ultimate purpose and potential, which is resurrection and eternal life in Christ.

The first part of this presentation will deal with sin and death, and our fallen condition. It may sound a bit dark and dreary at times. But this is the reality of our fallen condition. If we're going to talk about the human body, we have to also talk about death. This body of ours will eventually grow old; and one day, it will die. But the second part of the presentation is more positive and hopeful, dealing with the spiritual potential inherent in our body.

Preliminary Points

Have you ever noticed how within our society today, so many people seem obsessed with the human body? This pertains not only to our own body, but to the bodies of others as well. We scrutinize and even grade each other's bodies!

We're into body-building and body-piercing. We tan our body and tattoo our body. We try to enhance our body through plastic surgery. Some try to surgically

alter the very gender of their body, to match their “sexual orientation.” Much of this stems from our materialistic culture. But if we look deeper, perhaps all this reveals a fundamental flaw in how we see ourselves, and how we see one another.

On closer observation, a tendency toward two extremes becomes apparent. On the one hand, we take great effort to pamper and indulge our bodies. The advertising industry clearly exploits and encourages sensuality. Seductive images of the human body are plastered throughout the Internet, on TV, in magazines, and on gigantic billboards, enticing us with various products. There is an obvious over-infatuation with the human body. For many, the body has become an idol.

On the other hand, our society openly disrespects the human body. We discard the body through abortion, before it’s even born. And we dispose of the human body through cremation, after it dies. Modern man gives little thought to the natural unity of our soul and body.

Many people believe that a human being is basically composed of an immaterial soul which is temporarily embedded in a material container, the human body. According to this belief, this union is not permanent. It will not last forever. Some religions teach that our soul may be re-incarnated, that is, that it can move into and inhabit another body. And when that body dies, our soul will continue to be re-incarnated until attaining the highest spiritual state, that of no longer having a body at all.

Other philosophies teach that our soul was never meant to be in a body in the first place. According to this teaching, our soul existed before our body, in a bodiless state. For this school of thought, as a result of some prehistoric fall, our soul is now entrapped within our body and longs to be released from this prison.

Here again, the highest form of human life is for our soul to be freed from the prison of our body, so that it may return to that bodiless state from which it originated.

Our Orthodox Church, however, teaches differently. Our soul is not meant to exist apart from our body, nor our body apart from our soul. There is a natural and everlasting unity between our soul and body. They will forever be united as one. St. Gregory Palamas teaches, “The soul possesses such a natural union of love with its particular body that it never wants to abandon it.”¹

Our body and our soul are intended to function together in a harmonious relationship as one. According to Orthodox teaching, both our body and soul together make up our human person. Both our body and our soul, together as one, make us who we are. According to Metropolitan Hierotheos (Vlachos), “Every body is connected with one soul, and every soul is connected with one body, and the two together constitute the particular [person], a definite man.”² In truth, our soul was not created to be ever separated from our body.

Sin and Death

There is one exception, of course, and that is during that unnatural and temporary tragedy of death. Death is one of life’s great mysteries. And our understanding of death reflects our understanding of life. How we see death will influence how we see ourselves, how we see the world around us, and how we see God.

¹ *Natural Chapters* 38, *The Philokalia*, Volume 4 (London, 1995), p. 363.

² *Life After Death*, trans. E. Williams (Levadia, Greece: 1996), p. 87.

Death is a fact of life. There is no escaping it. Yet the way we die is not as important as the way we approach it. I like this quote from Elder Zacharias (at St. Sophrony's monastery in Essex, England): "Will the death we are facing be transformed into a gift, a source of life, or will it destroy us? This depends entirely on our attitude."³

Perhaps we should first ask the question, "Why do we die?" "Why do we have to die in the first place?" The answer is that death is the direct result of sin. And sin, in the Orthodox perspective, is understood as willful self-separation from God. That's worth repeating: *Sin is willful self-separation from God*. Sin is breaking communion with our Creator.

It's like pulling an electrical plug out of the socket on the wall. There's no longer any connection. We are no longer linked to the source of power, to the source of life! That's what we do when we sin. We pull our plug out from the Source of Life, Who is our God.

In our Orthodox Church, sin is seen not so much as the breaking of a rule or regulation. Rather, sin is *a spiritual sickness* which separates us from God, separates us from each other, and even separates us from our own true selves. Sin is when we abuse our God-given freedom. We sin when we make wrong choices that lead to our separation from God's will and from God's likeness. Sin prevents us from participating in divine life. Sin also ruptures our relationship with other people. Sin leads ultimately to death.

Death, however, for the Orthodox Church is seen not so much as a punishment for our sin. Our God did not create death. He does not want death.

³ *Remember Thy First Love* (Waymart, PA: Mount Thabor Publishing, 2016), p. 162.

What God wants is our freedom, even if this means we might choose living for and loving ourselves more than Him.

God respects our freedom so much that He even allows us to separate ourselves from Him, if we so choose. Death is not a punishment, as much as it is a natural outcome of what happens when we sin, when we cut ourselves off not only from other people, but also from God.

Far from what was originally intended by our Creator, the world is now bound by disease, destruction, dysfunction, and ultimately, death. Our abuse and misuse of our freedom has thrown man's relationship with creation out of balance. This is not the world as originally created by God. It is the result of our misuse, and abuse, of our God-given freedom.

Even though we are created in the image and likeness of God, in a world originally created good and beautiful, we are, in fact, born into a 'death-bound' universe. According to Metropolitan Hierotheos, "All people taste the terrible mystery of death, since we all inherit sinfulness and death. In other words, we are born to die. Death is the surest, most certain event in our life."⁴

In many ways, however, we would rather forget that death exists. We seek rather to preserve our youth. We lose sight of the fact that we are fallen and that we live in a fallen condition. This way of life, indeed this way of death, is not what God intended. Our separation from God results in death, which has engulfed the world since the Fall of Adam.

⁴ *Life After Death*, p. 22.

In fact, there are two kinds of death: 1) physical death—the separation of our soul from our body; and even worse than that is 2) spiritual death—the separation of our soul from God. St. Gregory Palamas teaches, “Physical death is when the soul leaves the body and is separated from it. But the death of the soul is when God leaves the soul and is separated from it ... Once separated from God [the soul] becomes more ugly and useless than a dead body, but unlike such a body it does not disintegrate after death.”⁵

Yet in spite of death, life is still good! Because of God’s great goodness and love for mankind, life on earth is indeed still beautiful. Life is so beautiful that at times we consider our sinful condition, and even death itself, as being ‘natural’ to us; as people say, “he ‘died of natural causes.’”

The truth is that death is *not natural* to us. Our separation from God, and the separation of our soul from our body, are indeed unnatural. Sin, sickness, and death are actually alien and foreign to our nature as human beings. God did not create us to suffer these things. These are all consequences of our separating ourselves from God, in Whose image and likeness we are originally created.

It is interesting to note, however, that our Church Fathers teach that in light of God’s great love and mercy, death can be considered as a remedy for sin, and not so much as punishment. The fact that we will one day die can lead many people to repentance and the struggle against sin and our separation from God.

By tolerating death, God providentially limits our sin and limits our separation from Him. God allows death to exist, but turns it against our sinfulness

⁵ *Homilies* 16. 7, ed. and trans. C. Veniamin (Waymart, PA: Mt. Thabor Publishing, 2009), p. 118.

and our spiritual sicknesses. God sets a boundary to our sin. And thus His original plan for our eternal life remains intact.

In light of the love of the Resurrected Christ for us, it's better for us to grow old and eventually die. That is to say, it's better that our soul be temporarily separated from our body, rather than allowing our unnatural separation from God to last forever.

In His great love for us, God provides us with opportunities to freely repent from our sins and strive for true life in Christ. Christ has liberated human nature. He has set us free from the bonds of sin and death, through His own death and Resurrection. Furthermore, Christ empowers us, as living members of His Resurrected Body, with the means to defeat the forces of spiritual death, here and now.

We see, then, when we look at death through the lens of our Lord's Resurrection, we see it in an entirely new light. Death is only temporary. In God's eyes, death is only momentary. There will be an end to death. It will not last forever. In Christ, death is seen in a completely different perspective.

Resurrection

At this point, let's move on from talking about sin and death. Now, let's focus on what our Church teaches about the resurrection and the sanctification of the human body. Belief in the resurrection is fundamental to the Orthodox Faith. Our Church teaches that every human being who has ever lived will be resurrected on the Last Day. Each one of us, whether a believer in the Resurrection or not, will be resurrected and reunited with his or her own body. And we will be judged, in

our body, for how we lived and for what we did in these bodies while we lived here on earth.

The Apostle Paul teaches that Christ “will transform our lowly body, that it may be conformed to His glorious body.”⁶ Our resurrected body will be our same body, but it will be glorified. It will be a spiritual body. St. John Chrysostom writes of the resurrected body, “It is the same, and not the same; the same, because the substance is the same; but not the same, because this is more excellent, the substance remaining the same but its beauty becoming greater, and the same body rising up new.”⁷

St. Gregory Palamas writes,

When those who have lived here in a godly manner are separated from their bodies, they are not separated from God; and in the resurrection, they will be reunited with their body, and they will take their bodies with them to God, and in their bodies they will enter with inexpressible joy there where Jesus has preceded us, and in their bodies they will enjoy the glory that will be revealed in Christ.⁸

He continues, “But this does not apply to those who live this present life in a sinful manner and who at death have no communion with God. For though all will be resurrected, yet the resurrection of each individual will be in accordance with his own inner state.”⁹

⁶ Phil. 3: 21.

⁷ *Homilies on First Corinthians* 41.3, trans. T. Chambers, NPNF, first series, vol. 12 (Peabody, MA: 2004 [reprint]), p. 250.

⁸ *To the Nun Xenia 15, The Philokalia*, Vol. 4, p. 298.

⁹ *Ibid.*

The deep respect and reverence the Orthodox Church has for the human body is based on the Incarnation of Christ. It is based on our belief that God has become man, that God assumed a human body, and that God lived a human life, just like every other human being. Not only are we uniquely created in the image of God, but the Son of God has assumed our human nature, with a real human body. He did not assume the nature of an angel, nor of any other created being. God became human.

And not only has our human nature—including our body—been assumed by the Son of God, but it was also resurrected by Him after His voluntary death on the Holy Cross. Furthermore, forty days after His Resurrection, at His glorious Ascension, Christ took His body with Him, so that His complete human nature—including His human body—now sits “at the right hand of the Father.” Christ, the Son of God, will never cease being human.

This is the same Resurrected Body that the faithful become part of through Holy Baptism. This is the same Resurrected Body we believers partake in when receiving Holy Communion. We become the Body of Christ—not because we lose our own bodies, but because we become members of the Risen Body of Christ. Together as one, our body and soul will be resurrected into eternal life.

The Organic Unity of Our Body and Soul

According to Orthodox teaching, man has a unique position in God’s creation. Of all of God’s creatures, only man is both spiritual and physical (or material). We are spiritual by nature in our soul, and we are physical by nature in our body.

Furthermore, there is a natural interconnection that exists between our soul and body. For example, the sufferings of our soul can affect our body. According to St. Porphyrios, “With stress, pressure, distress, or anxiety, an ulcer or cancer comes about. When there are confusions in our soul, these have influence on our body and our health suffers.”¹⁰ The condition of our body thus affects the condition of our soul, and *vice versa*.

Our body also participates in prayer. According to Orthodox teaching, our entire person, both our soul and body, participates in prayer. Indeed, our body is created for prayer. We pray by bowing our heads and bending our knees, by making prostrations and crossing ourselves. We pray by kneeling and standing, by kissing icons and lighting candles. We read our prayers and chant our prayers. Some pray with tears.

Prostrations are an excellent illustration of how our body participates in prayer. St. Porphyrios teaches, “When prostrations are made for Christ, grace works directly on the soul ... We acknowledge our lowliness and display our respect in a tangible way. With prostrations the Christian is humbled, and this helps for the grace of God to come upon him. ... Prostrations are a sacrifice and offering—an offering of love and worship. And the whole person participates in this worship, both body and soul.”¹¹

What we do *to* our body, and what we do *with* our body, what we put on it and in it, directly affects our spiritual health. This pertains not only to positive practices such as fasting and prostrations, but also in a negative way; for our

¹⁰ *Wounded by Love*, trans. J. Raffan (Limni, Greece: 2005), p. 229.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 169.

participation in the passions of the flesh, to whatever degree, will negatively affect our spiritual lives. They drive away divine grace and hinder our pursuit of prayer.

The Sanctification of the Human Body

There is one other, very important point concerning our Orthodox understanding of the human body that must be mentioned. This concerns the uniquely Orthodox experience of *the sanctification* of the human body. The sanctification of our body results from the sanctification of our soul. When our soul is sanctified, this directly affects our body. St. Gregory Palamas writes, “In the spiritual man, the grace of the Spirit, transmitted to the body through the soul, grants to the body also the experience of things divine, and allows [the body] the same blessed experiences as the soul undergoes.”¹²

The word ‘to sanctify’ is referred to throughout the liturgical life of our Church. To begin with, the Apostle Paul writes to the Corinthians, “But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus.”¹³ This same phrase is referred to in the Sacrament of Holy Chrismation: “Thou art justified. Thou art illumined. Thou art sanctified.”¹⁴

Elsewhere in our liturgical life, the term ‘sanctify’ refers directly to both soul and body. During the Mystery of Holy Unction, we chant, “O Christ Who ... hast sanctified both our souls and bodies from on high ...”¹⁵ In the Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts, at the Litany Before the Lord’s Prayer, the priest prays quietly,

¹² *Defense of the Hesychasts*, 2. 2. 12, trans. N. Gendle (under the title *The Triads*), New York, 1983, p. 51 (italics mine).

¹³ 1 Corinthians 6. 1.1

¹⁴ The Mystery of Holy Chrismation, Prayer Before the Tonsure, *Service Book*, trans. I. Hapgood (Englewood, NJ: 1975), p. 284.

¹⁵ The Mystery of Holy Unction, *Service Book*, Canticle 5, trans. Hapgood, p. 336.

“Sanctify all our souls and bodies with the sanctification which cannot be taken away.”¹⁶ In the Prayers Before Holy Communion, at the Second Prayer, we pray, “Let these holy Gifts be unto my healing, ... and sanctification of both soul and body ...”¹⁷ At the Third Prayer, we pray, “O Master, sanctify my soul and body, my mind and heart ...”¹⁸ There are many other examples. The point is that in the mind of the Church, our body was created for sanctity, for holiness.

Holy Relics

As we come to our conclusion, allow me to share one last point, which concerns the topic of holy relics. Holy relics are the clearest manifestation of how the human body can indeed be sanctified through divine grace.

Historically speaking, since the time of the first great persecutions, Christians have honored the relics of the saints—of the holy martyrs, in particular. For this reason, pagan persecutors, after torturing and killing the holy martyrs of Christ, would often dispose their bodies by throwing them into the sea, so their relics would not fall into the hands of the Christians who would then honor and venerate them. In many cases, the martyrs’ relics became, by God’s grace, sources of countless miracles and healings.

Once the early persecutions ended, Christians continued gathering and preserving the relics of their saints. This gave rise to the practice of the reverent

¹⁶ The Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts, Litany Before the Lord’s Prayer, trans. St. Tikhon’s Monastery Press, *Service Books of the Orthodox Church* vol. 2, 1984, p. 148.

¹⁷ Prayers Before Holy Communion, Second Prayer (St. Basil), *A Prayer Book for Orthodox Christians*, trans. Holy Transfiguration Monastery, p. 358. The numbering of Pre-Communion Prayers differs slightly in some manuals.

¹⁸ Prayers Before Holy Communion, Third Prayer (St. John Chrysostom), *A Prayer Book for Orthodox Christians*, pp. 359-360.

removal of relics from their graves. These relics were then solemnly placed within altars of local churches, often built in their honor.

As early as the fourth century, at the consecration of a church, the practice of placing relics within the holy altar became widespread. This practice was based on the ancient Christian custom of celebrating the Holy Eucharist directly over the tombs of the martyrs, stemming from the very beginning of the life of our Church.

This practice is continued today. At the Service for the Consecration of an Orthodox Church, the local bishop seals relics within the holy altar, so that the Holy Eucharist is still celebrated over the relics of martyrs and saints, even today. Holy relics play a fundamental role within the life of our Orthodox Church. Interestingly, several early heretical groups disapproved of their veneration, as do the majority of contemporary Protestant confessions.

Today, throughout the Orthodox world, many holy relics are known as sources for healing, exorcisms, and other miracles. Countless instances are found throughout the Lives of our Saints. Relics are often known to emit fragrant myrrh. A notable example is St. Demetrius the Myrrh-gusher (†306), the patron Saint of Thessalonica. His holy relics still emit fragrant myrrh today.

In many instances, bodies of saints remain entirely incorrupt. In other words, their bodies have not decomposed. Their skin still remains intact, even hundreds of years after their deaths. To cite just a few examples: St. Gerasimos of Kephalaria (†1579) - “Until the present day, the body of St. Gerasimos remains complete and incorrupt, as if he were asleep. It distills a heavenly fragrance and works many miracles. The Saint has become the patron of the island of Kephalaria, the

protector of all the inhabitants ... Particularly notable is his power to deliver the possessed, who are brought from all quarters into the presence of his relics.”¹⁹

On Mount Athos, at the Monastery of Vatopedi, the skull of St. John Chrysostom still retains not only skin, but also his entire left ear. His incorrupt right hand, with fingers in the form of a blessing, is at the Monastery of Philotheou. The incorrupt left hand of St. Mary Magdalene is found at the Monastery of Simonos Petras. The incorrupt leg of St. Photini the Samaritan woman is at the Monastery of Iveron. Here in America we have St. John Maximovitch’s incorrupt relics in a cathedral in San Francisco.

Holy relics bear witness to the truth of our Church’s teaching on the deification of our human nature, and more specifically, on the potential sanctification, or holiness, of the human body.

Conclusion

To summarize, then, we have seen how our Orthodox Church holds the human body in the highest esteem. This respect for the human body extends to all of God’s material creation. We are created, and we are called, to live our lives as a high priest of the entire Creation, by offering Creation back to our Creator, with genuine and humble gratitude and thanksgiving: “*Thine own of Thy own we offer to Thee*” (as is said during the Divine Liturgy), beginning with our own hearts, minds, and bodies.

Our body is an important part of our spiritual lives. As human beings, how we view and what we do to and with our body can lead to either our salvation, or

¹⁹ *The Synaxarion* vol. 1, October 20, Ormylia, Greece, 1998, p. 437.

to our separation from God; to our sanctification, or to condemnation; to genuine spiritual life, or to eternal spiritual death.

As Orthodox Christians, we look beyond the temporary tragedy of bodily death. We anticipate instead our resurrection in Christ, where our body too will one day participate in God's eternal life of divine grace and glory.

In the words of Elder Vasileios of Mount Athos: "It is the end, the conclusion, the Resurrection that throws light on everything. Without the Resurrection, everything is obscure and meaningless ... Without the Resurrection and freedom from death, man is a defective creature. He does not truly live, he merely vegetates. He withers, and, one day he will be obliterated within time."²⁰

In conclusion, we must not limit our body to this earthly life, to this worldly, secular sphere—where it can remain separated and estranged from God. The human body must be seen in light of its ultimate purpose and true spiritual potential, which is resurrection and sanctification in Christ. Only with this eternal dimension to our daily lives do we become truly human. Only with this eternal perspective to our spiritual lives do we become the true children of God that we were created to be.

Every human person, created in the image and likeness of God, is unique and unrepeatable. And we must strive to see the eternal worth of every human being—every single human soul—no matter how difficult the character, the depth of spiritual flaws, or the extent of personal failings, beginning with ourselves. We must struggle to attain the fullness of our lives as human beings, within the therapeutic and healing life of Christ's Holy Body—His Holy Church.

²⁰ *The Divine Liturgy as a Theophany of the Holy Trinity*, trans. E. Theokritoff, Montreal, 2015, p. 15

The Church gives life and sanctifies life. And we too, as Orthodox Christians, must seek to save life and to sanctify life, starting with our own life, our own heart, our own mind—and our own body.