



Liviu Petcu

The Fathers of the *Romanian Paterikon* on Compassion and Serving the Sick

Abstract

Serving God is not fulfilled exclusively by directly referring to Him, in prayers, in the services of the Church and the observance of the Divine Commandments, but more in compassion and serving, under different forms, our neighbors who are sick. Jesus said to the Pharisees when they complained about Him eating with sinners: “I desire mercy, not sacrifice” (Mt. 9:13; *cp.* Also Hos. 6:6, Mic. 6:8). From the perspective of the Romanian pious people, whose lives and worthy acts are briefly presented in the *Romanian Paterikon*, there is no better sign of recognition of a faithful man and of a person who loves Christ than serving brothers and caring for their salvation and there is nothing else that provokes God’s wrath than one’s disregarding one’s



Rev. PhD Assistant
Professor of Patristic
Theology at the “Dumitru
Stăniloae” Faculty of
Orthodox Theology of
“Alexandru Ioan Cuza”
University Iasi, Romania

duties toward his or her neighbors.

In this article, we intend to present coherently both how the Romanian pious served the sick, with self-sacrificing love that stands unequalled, serving even persons suffering from contagious diseases and their advice regarding suffering and caring for people enduring illness. Their teachings and guidance, still applicable today, actually stand as a form of spiritual therapy as they address a multitude of questions, spiritual dilemmas, and concerns. Reading their texts, we comprehend that the love of these pious men was so intense that they had an inclination toward, and an empathy and understanding for every person and their endurance in suffering, hardship or difficulties was supported and strengthened by Christ, by faith in Him and the remembrance of the eternal blessings of His Kingdom.

Keywords

Romanian Paterikon, compassion, serving, sick, spirituality

1 A Christians' spiritual excellence is love for one's neighbor in the Name of God

We love God as He is love (1 Jn. 4:8), He revealed Himself to man as Absolute Love, we love a man as God has loved him and valued him supremely and we must love God's creation because it is beautiful, harmonious and worthy of love. By loving God, all men could become one as love is the element that guides realities and unifies them. From a philocalic perspective, Abba Dorotheos wrote the following:

“let us suppose that this circle is the world and that God Himself is the center; the straight lines drawn from the circumference to the center are the lives of men. To the degree that the saints enter into the things of the Spirit, they desire to come near to

God ... the closer they are to God, the closer they become to one another”¹.

Jesus Christ asserted that the Christian’s spiritual excellence is his love for his neighbor in the Name of God. Love represents the foundation of the commandments, of divine love and *the most important* imperative of Jesus Christ the Saviour (Jn. 15:12) Who set it as the fundamental law of the New Covenant that He wished to renew and redeem. The conclusion St. John Chrysostom draws regarding this matter is that love is the beginning, the root and the mother of all virtues. This is the very image of Christ’s disciples, the particular attribute of God’s servants, the distinguishing sign of the Apostles: “By this, all will know that you are My disciples if you have love one for another” (Jn. 13:35). “Having love one for another” (Jn. 13:35)² is the Christian’s most important characteristic and strength, not raising the dead, healing lepers or casting our demons. By loving one’s neighbor we prove that we love God, by serving our neighbor, we attend God. Saint Gregory of Nazianzus advises us to go to Christ as we see Him in others less fortunate than ourselves, to call Him closer to us, to care for Christ, to give Him something to eat and glorify Him³. Serving man is more important than any other endeavor and virtue, and the foundation of our social life and the “root of all virtue is love for people”⁴.

Augustine, whose works represent an imperishable contribution to the heritage of the universal culture and whose life was adorned with two of the most admirable virtues:

¹ Dorotheos of Gaza, *Discourses and Sayings (Cistercian Studies)*, translated by Eric Wheeler (Michigan, 1977), pp. 138-139.

² St. John Chrysostom, “Against Anomoeans about the incapacity to understand God”, homily I, 1, *Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Graeca*, 48 (1862), col. 701-702.

³ St. Gregory the Theologian, “De pauperum amore”, *Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Graeca*, 35 (1857), col. 890.

⁴ St. John Chrysostom, “Conciones VII de Lazaro”, 6, *Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Graeca*, 48 (1862), col. 990.

humility and love, virtues that characterized the incarnate Son of God, in his attempt to invigorate his listeners and accustom them to cultivating ever more profoundly love for one's neighbours, exhorts them as follows: "The price of wheat is your money, the price of your lands is your silver, the price of a pearl is your gold, the price of love is yourself (...) If love is what you want to have then look into your soul and discover yourself"⁵.

The topic of love for one's neighbor has a recurrent character in the thinking of the Holy Apostles and the Fathers of the Church. In their writings, the Fathers of the Church imply that love makes us become more like God. Other good acts can be seen only in men, such as fighting against passions, fighting lust, anger, and various other similar desires, yet love is what we share with God. Since love does not ask for any other reward than a response of love, so God expects from us, for His love, our love in return, thus, we should not love only in word, but put our love into actions and deeds. We should persevere in loving men as God loves them. Saint Maximus the Confessor considers that, as God, being good by nature and free of any passion, loves all men equally, so that the righteous and those healed from passions, fulfilling His will, could love all men equally⁶.

"For God is truly loving unto man, nor can all time worthily express His loving kindness; nay, not if all the tongues of men unite together will they be able to even so to declare any considerable part of His loving-kindness"⁷.

⁵ Blessed Augustine, "Sermo XXXIV", 4, *Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Latina*, 38 (1865), col. 212.

⁶ St. Maximus the Confessor, "Capita de Charitate", I, 25, *Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Graeca*, 90 (1865), col. 965B.

⁷ St. Cyril, Archbishop of Jerusalem, "Catechetical lectures", II, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, vol. VII, ed. by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Michigan, 1996), p. 10.

2 Compassion for our neighbor

The word compassion comes from Latin (the noun *compassiō, ōnis* = “suffering together, feeling together;” the adjective *compassibilis* = “someone who suffers together with and shares someone else’s suffering”) and it primarily means “to suffer together”⁸. Thus, this word has multiple extended meanings such as “kindness”, “sympathy”, “mercy”, etc. Being merciful and generous means being capable of empathy and not abandoning someone who is suffering, being able to empathize with men when in pain and torment. The Greek word *συμπάσχω* has the same meaning of suffering together, of experiencing the same feelings, empathizing with a person, having the same feelings, sympathizing, etc.⁹ Every Christian, as a disciple and follower of the Lord, has the responsibility to translate compassion into deeds, to endeavor, in his or her turn, as Christ did, to heal, to release, to comfort, to free from evil or stretch out a helping hand where needed. Christ Himself is present in every Christian’s gesture of compassion. In Christianity, the merciful man becomes the hands and the legs of Christ Who gives the response, through them, to the prayers of those in need, to those who experience torment, who suffer for any reason or from disease, those who have asked ardently for God’s help. The same Christ conceals Himself under the image of those who are hungry, thirsty, alienated, naked, sick, in prison, etc. (Mt. 25:34-45). Thus, on the one hand, there is Christ the Lord, the Healer Who empathizes with and heals and on the other hand there is the sick who are served and comforted. Certainly, the Church, under this aspect and according to the teachings of Matthew (25:35-45), considers that the one who refuses to provide help to a sick person *afflicts*

⁸ Félix Gaffiot, *Le Grand Gaffiot. Dictionnaire Latin-Français* (Paris: Hachette, 2000), p. 242.

⁹ Anatole Bailly, *Dictionnaire Grec-Français* (Paris: Hachette, 2000), p. 1826.

Christ Himself. The Saviour does more than a simple merciful deed or gesture; He dwells in those who partake of His love: "If we love one another, God dwelleth in us and His love is perfected in us" (1 Jn. 4:12).

Love, which is the foundation of the Divine Laws and the mother of all virtues; it provides everything for all humans. It embraces a friend and raises those who have fallen into the chasm of passions or the depth of despair, it comforts and encourages those who are despised; it inspires courage; it instills strength and *calmness and self-assurance* into the one who is overwhelmed by shyness; it stretches out a helping hand to the one who needs one; it heals the wounds of the man who has fallen among thieves; it attends the sick with devotion, modesty, respect, and love; it bears the burdens of the weak (Gal. 6:2); it gives good advice to those who could fall in the mud of passions; it feeds the hungry; it gives drink to the thirsty; it clothes the one who is naked; it takes care of the sick (Mt. 25:35-36), etc. Love brings souls and hearts together, and it causes man serve man. Love makes the man who experiences and continuously improves it to rejoice, and this rejoicing brings joy to others, and that is the rejoicing brought about by fulfilling the Divine Commandment to love one another which is the foundation of all the others and it represents a *sine qua non* condition for entering the promised Kingdom.

From the patristic perspective, our neighbour is another me; this is the reason why we call brothers those who were reborn through the intermediary of the Same Word, meaning that through Baptism, we all become spiritual sons, and thus we become brothers in Christ, our Brother, Who took on our body out of His infinite love for us and our salvation. God turns His face to those who turn their faces to their neighbor whom they help mercifully, and He is, as Clement of Alexandria writes,

“close to those who stay close to their neighbor”¹⁰. To inspire even more and convince them of this, St. Basil the Great, Father of the Church and a man with a relentless activity and with outstanding administrative skills, says:

“I beg you to be mindful of your own generous character, and to look to the Lord Who requites good deeds! (...) Remember your own promises, recognizing that you are human and must yourself look for that time when you will need God’s help ... by showing all kindness and clemency to the afflicted, attract God’s pity to yourself”¹¹.

The same Father of the Church exhorted everyone to approach the collective endeavour as being their personal concern and to be convinced that he or she essentially participates in the success or the failure of the community¹², because “we stand more in need of the succour of each of the brethren than one hand does of the other”¹³.

3 Serving the sick according to the *Romanian Paterikon*

The Church has always considered those whom God has thought worthy of the trials caused by sickness to be special in His sight. The great love and the special care the Church has provided for the suffering faithful have taken a concrete form ever since the first Christian centuries by establishing important philanthropic institutions. We mention, naturally,

¹⁰ Clement of Alexandria, “The Stromata”, VI, XVII, 161.6., translation, foreword, notes and indexes by Fr. D. Fecioru, in *PSB*, vol. 5 (Bucharest: IBMBOR Publishing, 1982), p. 472.

¹¹ St. Basil the Great, *Letters*, 108, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, vol. VIII, edited by Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company), p. 545. In this epistle St. Basil asks for support from a high official for a widow who had difficulties paying her taxes.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 415.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 531.

Basiliada – that *city of charity*, as St. Gregory the Theologian called the charity and philanthropic institution established by St. Basil the Great that became a paradigm for social care until today. Saint Gregory of Nyssa, St. Basil's brother who was the founder of the institution mentioned above and bearing his brother's name, in one of his writings that deals masterfully with the topic of love for the poor and good deeds, teaches his readers that people should at least care for people in proximity and he considers this a thing of great importance. Thus, he exhorts everybody not to abandon and let others be cared for and served by somebody else. A man should mind the treasure next to him and not allow others to bear it away. Everybody should embrace the suffering man as if the latter were of gold and should love the suffering as they love their health, their wife, children, servants and their entire family's health¹⁴. Continuing, St. Gregory underlines that, if health allows him or her to, a poor person will ask for alms from the rich or he or she will stand at crossroads and ask for benefaction from passers-by, whereas suffering men wait for us, lovers of people¹⁵.

In books of Christian spirituality about serving and love for one's neighbor, the advice of the Fathers of the Church is categorical: everyone should consider as their most valuable asset, the service, and advantage he or she brings to their neighbor, as our neighbor's value is equal to ours. *The Egyptian Paterikon* tells of an old man, Apollo, who would help whoever asked him and said: "I am going to work with Christ today, for the salvation of my soul, for that is the reward he gives"¹⁶. This humble and loving concern for our neighbor is ontologically inscribed in us. From this perspective, St. Basil the Great is of

¹⁴ St. Gregory of Nyssa, "De pauperibus amandis", *Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Graeca*, 46 (1863), col. 458D-459A.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers. The Alphabetical Collection*, translated, with a foreword by Benedicta Ward, Preface by Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh (Oxford: Cistercian Publications, 1975), p. 36.

the opinion that there is nothing more characteristic to our nature than being sociable, helpful and full of love for one other¹⁷.

The historian of the Church, Palladius, wrote about a man named Apollonius, a merchant, had this occupation during his twenty years of life on the mountain.

“From his private money and from his own labors he bought in Alexandria all sorts of drugs and things needed for the cells and provided all the brotherhood with them in their illnesses ... for about 5,000 monks inhabiting the mountain there was a need for these visits since the place was a desert”¹⁸.

In certain situations, spiritually advanced monks, having got very old and suffering from illnesses, and having nobody to serve and visit them were sent an angel of God to attend and provide them the care they needed. In the following lines of this article, we will present an account from the *Egyptian Paterikon* about an elder who, being sick and as there was nobody to serve him at that time, would wake up every morning and eat whatever he could find in his cell. This is how he spent most days, and nobody came to him to ask him about his condition. After 30 days had passed without receiving any help, God sent an angel to the elder to serve him. The angel stayed for seven days with the elder. Then the brothers remembered the old man and came to his cell. As the brothers were knocking at the door, the angel disappeared, and the elder was shouting at them to leave. The brothers, however, broke the door, entered the cell and asked him why he was shouting. Then the elder told them “I had suffered for thirty days and nobody served me and seven days ago God sent an angel to me, and he served me and

¹⁷ St. Basil the Great, “Regulae fusius tractatae”, *Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Graeca*, 31 (1885), col. 918A.

¹⁸ Palladius, *The Lausiac History*, XIII, translated by W.H. Lowther Clarke (London, 1918), p. 67.

as you entered he vanished.' Saying this, the elder passed away and the brothers, marveling at this, praised God"¹⁹.

In Romania, as well as in other many places, the first hospitals were established on the premises of monasteries, the so-called *bolnița* (care home) where monks were attending suffering people as if they were in front of the altar. Beside these care homes, under the auspices of bishoprics, monasteries or parishes, were functioning care homes for the elderly, canteens for the poor, orphanages, etc. Those who were serving their neighbours were considering that, as far as the value and meaning of man was concerned, second in importance after God came man who is like God; they were serving the sick with Christian love; they were encouraging the patients in patience; they were inspiring hope for their improvement; they were comforting the sick; they were reminding them of the meaning of disease and the primary purpose of the earthly life – they were reminding the sick, especially the terminally ill, and all those receiving a letal diagnosis or an ill-fated prognosis, all these things. Then the care-takers were debating the causes of disease as well as the fact that it was God's will that was working through unprovoked illness. These servants were teaching the suffering people that illness of the body was purifying (as fire cleans iron rust, so does disease cleanse man's sin) and in particular that they were not alone on the path of suffering as Christ suffers together with each of them until the end of time, according to the suffering everyone endures, as the Fathers of the Church say.

Therefore, people should fulfill and do good deeds in all places and circumstances. In this regard, St. John Chrysostom underlines the fact that if good deeds will not be fulfilled, then

¹⁹ *The Paterikon that contains useful words of the Old Saints*, p. 480.

there is no use for us to call ourselves Christians²⁰. Faith without good deeds is just a shadow lacking strength²¹.

The Romanian Paterikon tells of young monks who had their obedience to serve the sick who were at the end of their life on earth, and they were so diligent and devout in the fulfilling of their assignment that they would never fall asleep if any of the elder fathers were suffering from the disease. They were convinced that only by dedicating their lives to their neighbor, their own life and activity would become filled with meaning, fruitful and useful to others. They were living for God and their neighbors. They loved everyone as they did not love anything related to this world. Their self-sacrifice was complete when serving those people who were suffering and had been entrusted to them. Enduring suffering together, moving the knots of the payer rope through their fingers, praying day and night, repeating over and over again the Jesus prayer or saying: "Lord, have mercy on your servant!" and "Holy unmercenary physicians, be intercessors for this servant of God!", etc.

What is more, wherever possible, some of these young monks were going fishing and then they were cooking, for the sick men they were serving, what they had caught, in an attempt to strengthen their patients, to heal or at least to alleviate their condition and make them feel better. As it was not possible for them to restore or heal missing limbs and debilitated organs, namely: the eyes of the blind, the limbs of limp men, they *became themselves* replacements of those missing limbs and organs, and through their intermediary the blind could see, and the men who had had their legs amputated could walk again. There is hardly anything that could equal this love for people. They were attending these sick men with brotherly love, not to receive appreciation or to be praised by people or for the

²⁰ St. John Chrysostom, "Homiliae IX de Poenitentia", 9, 1, *Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Graeca*, 49 (1862), col. 343.

²¹ Idem, "Epistolae", 8, 1, *Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Graeca*, 62 (1862), col. 643.

interest of any person or group. Their effort was relentless, and weariness and laziness would never prevent them from fulfilling their activity as they did not consider that they were serving the bodies and the souls of strangers, but those of Christ's servants; thus, their endeavor was offered to God with a pure and sincere heart. Whenever one of the sick men was called to God, they would watch over the dead body praying unceasingly until the time of the funeral service.

Christians do not only convey compassion to those who suffer, but also the availability to stay close, to give advice and help so that a suffering person could overcome difficulties and accept sickness without protest and revolt. True love does not consist of words but in deeds. The person who sacrifices himself or herself for his neighbor, putting forth efforts and serving from pure love, although he or she might seem to bear the burden of tiredness, enjoys tranquility through this strenuous effort and his or her soul is comforted by God.

By serving the sick and the helpless, Christians become worthy of receiving God's grace and abundant mercy. For the monks serving an elder until his death, it was a great blessing, and this was even greater when someone was serving their confessor or their father. Analyzing their aim – the salvation of the soul – they were convinced that the sick person was, in fact, serving them and not the other way around. They perfectly fulfilled the words of St. Maximus the Confessor who advises with his well-known heartiness: "let us value love for people more than this world and our own bodies"²².

Whenever there was a spiritual need for it, Christ the Lord would prompt some of the old hermits to return in the world for a while to support and serve their elder brothers who were living in the middle of the dessert, secluded, separated from men, close to God.

²² St. Maximus the Confessor, "Cuvânt ascetic", 8, *Filocalia*, vol. II (Bucharest: Humanitas Publishing, 1999), p. 28.

It is not our intention to provide details about all the care homes established by Romanian monks on the premises of monasteries in Romania because there were numerous buildings erected for this purpose of caring, comforting, strengthening spiritually and, eventually, healing the sick. We shall only mention the most prominent ones.

The Romanian Paterikon mentions, among other information, that the Metropolitan Atanasie Crimca (of Moldova and Suceava, † 1631), in addition to his concern for embellishing and maintaining churches and the salvation of souls, was preoccupied with alleviating illness and the suffering of the body. In 1610 he established a care home at Dragomirna Monastery where both monks and laymen were being assisted. In 1619 he established a hospital in the city of Suceava where numerous ill people were being healed. Following the example of St. Basil, a disciplined and practical spirit, Metropolitan Atanasie is the founder of the first public hospital in our country²³.

Under this aspect, Pious Father Paisus of Neamț († 1794) is worthy of remembrance as he was particularly preoccupied with serving the sick. At Neamț Monastery he had a hospital and guest houses built. The starets was selecting the elderly and sick persons to be treated in the hospital and brother Onusie, the coordinator of the care home, was the one who was in charge of this activity. He asked the attendants to serve the sick people as if they were serving God, to provide them good food, white bread, and wine, to wash them weekly and to keep the care home as clean as possible.

The starets also accepted in the hospital laymen who were suffering from various diseases and had no other place to stay. They were hosted in separate cells, were receiving food from

²³ Archimandrite Ioanichie Bălan, *Patericul românesc ce cuprinde viața și cuvintele unor sfinți și cuvioși părinți ce s-au nevoit în mănăstirile românești (secolele III-XX)*, 4th edition (Roman: Episcopia Romanului Publishing, 2001), p. 197.

the meals provided in the monastery and could stay there as long as they wanted, some of them even until their death. The disciples of Pious Paisus (of Neamț) said they had seen him attending all night long; his heart filled with pain, those who were extremely ill. He was suffering together with them and was sighing with them, and he was comforting the patients reminding them there was hope for healing and salvation, offering them no little comfort in their terrible suffering.

One of his successors in the spiritual coordination of Neamț Monastery, Neonil of Neamț Monastery († 1853), being very merciful and having a love for people, served to the best of his ability the sick. Thus, on the premises of Neamț Monastery he had a care home erected, replacing the one that had been destroyed by fire in 1841, for elderly and sick monks in the lavra, for those who were living in the sketes and the forest nearby and even for laymen. Beside this establishment, he set up a pharmacy and assigned monks and a doctor to attend the sick.

In Târgu Neamț, in 1852, he established an important hospital with one level, for 200 patients, with a chapel on the premises where a Father Confessor was celebrating religious services on a daily basis. He built a great pharmacy 'unequaled in Moldova' where a doctor was providing care for patients. In these two hospitals, the sufferings of many people were cured, and all the patients were receiving treatment without payment. Both the hospital and the pharmacy were maintained by the monastery²⁴.

Then, Bishop Ioanichie of Roman (the 18th century), in the town of Roman, established at the Monastery Great Precista (Dormition of the Mother of God) the first public hospital maintained from the income of the Church. Moreover, in the town of Focșani, on the premises of St. Prophet Samuel Monastery he established a public hospital whose Patron Saint

²⁴ Ibid., pp. 305.392.

was the Patron Saint of the church. In both hospitals, Bishop Ioanichie was paying canonical visits, was providing support and assigned hieromonks to celebrate religious services and nuns to look after the patients.

Archimandrite Timotei Ionescu, starets of Neamț Monastery (1806-1887), is another Romanian monk who dedicated himself to serving the sick in hospital and care home of the monastery, as well as to providing assistance to patients in the public hospital in Targu Neamț, an institution managed by the monastery where sick people were treated without money²⁵. More recently, St. John Jacob the Romanian of Neamț, known as the Chozebite²⁶ (1913-1960), who took his monastic vows at Neamț Monastery and lived 24 years in the Holy Land, in the Jordan Valley and in the Desert of Chozeba, had the obedience to look after the library and to serve as an orderly in the community of St. Sava. At night he would attend the service in the church, pray in his cell and look after the library and during the day he used to attend the sick persons in the care home on the premises. He would attend the ill monks and hermits, would bring them food, he was cleaning the wounds of the wounded that were brought there from the war zone, and he was comforting everyone with love, praying ceaselessly and experiencing Christ²⁷. For us, people living today, these are lessons of amenity, generosity, and hospitality.

All these have not remained mere memories, but they are made practical realities by the clergy and the faithful. The Church makes available to sick persons – especially to those who are

²⁵ Idem, *Patericul mănăstirilor nemțene* (Iași: Trinitas Publishing, 2011), pp. 30-96.

²⁶ St. Pious John Jacob the Romanian of Neamț, known as the Chozebite, was canonized as saint by the Romanian Orthodox Church in 1992. His holy relics are in St. George the Chozebite Monastery in the Desert of Chozeba. The Patriarchate of Jerusalem officially proclaimed the canonization of St. Pious John Jacob of Neamț on the 31st of January 2016.

²⁷ Archimandrite Ioanichie Bălan, *Patericul românesc*, p. 613.

members of indigent families – free medical examinations and treatments, because it is even today, through its social programs, close to those who suffer.

Those who attend the sick receive reward from God and forgiveness. In this regard, Pious Paisios the Hagiorite tells us about two Romanians living as hermits in a cell not far from Karyes. Once, one of them took to his bed with a severe illness and, unfortunately, the other could not attend him. For this reason, he was praying to St. Panteleimon to either heal his sick brother or to put an end to the suffering of his body in this life so that he would not have made any effort to serve him.

One day, as he was praying again to St. Panteleimon, the Saint appeared to him and said: “Why are you asking me this? Can’t see you are void of any virtue? For the care, you have provided to your brother you will receive a very little reward from God’. These words of St. Panteleimon gave the serving brother an inspiration.”²⁸ From that moment on he began to serve with great zeal his sick brother and was praying God to allow him to live long enough so that he could care for him as much as possible²⁹. Reading these accounts of love, we remember the words of St. John Chrysostom who was exclaiming: “It especially loves that reveals the saints.”³⁰

Thus, the Romanian pious, whose lives and wonderful deeds were partially presented in the *Romanian Paterikon*, were participating, affably, in the suffering and joys of their neighbours, always behaving thoughtfully, being ready to provide genuine help and from the depth of their hearts, knowing very well that Christianity is not limited to mere theoretical statements, but it recommends to incorporate its

²⁸ Pious Paisios the Hagiorite, *Părinți aghioriți. Flori din Grădina Maicii Domnului*, translation from Greek by hieroskemamonk Ștefan Nuțescu (Bucharest: Evanghelismos Publishing, 2004), p. 129.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

³⁰ St. John Chrysostom, “In Joannem Homilia LXII”, 3, *Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Graeca*, 59 (1862), col. 394.

principles into man's life as shown by the Founder of Christianity Himself: Christ the Lord. Our loving and compassionate attitude toward one is suffering neighbor value Christ esteemed and loved. Those who are on the bed of suffering need to feel a good heart, a good word, a good intention and on many occasions a just a single warm and compassionate glimpse at them.

The Romanian pious believed, with apodictic certainty that, through love, the faithful advance ceaselessly toward and in the Son of God, Jesus Christ, Who helps them through grace to reach the point that His human nature has reached through hypostatic union. Man can progress endlessly in living and experience the communion of love of the Holy Trinity, by integrating ever more profoundly this love into his soul and praising Love for Its own sake. Love, from a Christian point of view, displays traits of *imago Dei* that is engraved on our life and the constituent parts of the universe. Man, by his very nature, feels the need to enter into communion with the personal God, by continually aiming toward the Absolute because the power to love was implanted in his soul.

The human person is intrinsically guided and driven toward opening himself or herself through love, because man's fundamental characteristic, that created and maintains him, is the communion of persons in the Holy Trinity, as an eternal and ultimate mutual opening in the light of love. God wants His call to the ocean of love to be responded to promptly because He wishes His love to wash over us, but He does this only to fit everyone's thirst and eagerness. He loves each of us; He grants us whatever we ask Him, with one condition: to commit and direct ourselves to Him so that we may receive.

Man is called to respond to God's call with his or her love and respond to all men with the power of humble and sacrificial love that is acquired from close communion with Him. Christians do not love God for the beauty of Heaven, nor for fear of hell, they love Him for His goodness, for His infinite love for us and the entire creation that He shows and He will not

withhold the eternal inheritance from them because they will inherit it from Him.

4 Caring the sick suffering from contagious diseases

Eusebius of Caesarea, in his book *The History of the Church*, brings to the readers' attention an account of Dionysius of Alexandria, Origen's disciple. Dionysius was the first to compare martyrdom with serving one's neighbor. He underlines that, during an epidemic of plague in Alexandria, most of the brethren exerted themselves entirely through their unequalled love and brotherly devotion and they strengthened the bonds between them visiting without fear those who were sick, serving them in a way worthy of imitation, providing valuable help and support in matters related to the Christian faith and being prepared to die themselves together with them because when they were becoming infected with the disease from which their neighbor was suffering, and they were sharing and taking over the suffering of their neighbors.

Many of them passed away after having cared for the sick and healed their disease, thus dying as a result of the fact that they had assumed the death of the others. This way, the best of them passed away, whether they were Priests, Deacons, laymen, all of them equally worthy, for this death, caused by such profound love and faith, does not seem to be anything less than the death of martyrs.

As they are having received the bodies of the saints in their arms and on their laps, after having seen them pass away, they carried them on their shoulders and, embracing them and washing and dressing the corpses; they buried them. Shortly after that, they were in the same situation of needing care and

being served, and all those who were still alive were continuing the works of their predecessors.³¹

Even closer to present days, Archimandrite Ioannikios, in the work we have already cited³², mentions some monks that had spiritual and bodily strength, who were burning with sacrificial love and whose end of this earthly life was nothing less than a martyr's death. There was nothing that could prevent them from doing such hard work, not even the danger of being infected with a contagious disease while serving their sick brothers. Under this aspect, he speaks of Father Panteleimon, from the Athonite Skete of St. Anna, who dedicated himself to serving others. "He cared for those suffering from tuberculosis, fed those who were hungry during the great famine during the German occupation and, eventually, in 1948 he died, after he had become ill – all this without complaining. Instead of lamenting, he was praising God."

We present in the following lines an account that shows that God's will was different, in a case that is similar to those two mentioned above. During World War II, in the hospital of Ploiești, there were numerous patients suffering from exanthematic typhus, and many of them died without receiving the Holy Communion, and there was no one to celebrate the religious funeral service. Then, Father Sava Cimpoca (from the Skete of St. John the Baptist – Alba Iulia, † 1955) told the starets of Ghighiu Monastery: "If you allow, I shall go to give the patients the Holy Eucharist. I am not afraid I might get sick."

Thus, for two years, father Sava was the confessor of the sick in that hospital and comforted many broken-hearted patients and, with Christ's grace, he was kept safe and unharmed³³.

³¹ Eusebius of Caesarea, "Istoria bisericească", book 7, XXII, 7-10, translation, study, notes and comments by Fr. Professor T. Bodogae, in *PSB*, vol. 13 (Bucharest: IBMBOR Publishing, 1987), p. 292.

³² Archimandrite Ioannikios, *Patericul atonit*, translation by Anca Dobrin and Maria Ciobanu (Bacău: Bunavestire Publishing, 2000), p. 16.

³³ Archimandrite Ioanichie Bălan, *Patericul românesc*, p. 603.

In conclusion, we assert that Christian saints observed with great zeal the commandment to love one's neighbor. The concern to serve as well as possible one's neighbor represented the foundation of the crowning achievements of social service: care homes, hospices, hospitals, etc. Pious fathers and the faithful of the Church understood that welfare in this world and the salvation of the soul could be achieved when freed from selfishness, they succeed in dedicating all their zeal and effort to serving their neighbors, with the same love, humility, and commitment with which Christ the Lord served them.

5 Watching over suffering man

Enthusiastic and sincere love for the suffering of man is an existential commandment of the Gospel of Christ. Love is a "grace of the Lord": "Because the love of God has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit Who was given to us." (Rom. 5:5). In the communion of love with our neighbors, Christians become an instrument of the grace of divine love.

The Fathers' purpose was to turn every Christian's heart into an altar illuminated by love for God and people, on which the fire of prayers to God and the holy meditation on the words of the Spirit would burn ceaselessly. Christians approach, as true disciples of Christ, the sufferings of their neighbors as if they were their own. The Fathers of the Church recommended that Christians should take upon them what concerns their neighbor, to endure suffering together with him in any situation, to have the same feelings as if they shared the same body and griefs, whenever our neighbor is troubled; or as, the Scripture reads: "we are one body in Christ" (Rom. 12:5) and "the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one soul" (Acts. 4:32). Suffering from great zeal for "our body" is what God appreciates most. By this we understand, in fact, the suffering of our neighbor and attending him or her as Christians as parts of the Body of Christ (1 Cor. 12). It is love

that initiates the unreserved dedication to serve our neighbors and makes the one who cultivates and develops it perpetually to be filled with holy joy, a joy that he or she brings to others. The merciful man “takes place” of the one enduring sorrow, who prays and comforts, but Christ rewards him with the divine comfort that compensates for his pain. The one that serves his neighbors progresses spiritually and receives support himself or herself through the intermediary of those whom he or she supports. The man who gives strength receives strength. Regarding this, St. John Damascene says that the one who anoints another with aromatic oils spreads a pleasant scent or “as the one who wants to anoint with chrism or another oil a sick man is, in fact, the first to touch the oils and then anoints the sick man, so does the one who endeavors for the salvation of his neighbor first gain reward for himself or herself and then for the neighbor.”³⁴ The same Father of the Church adds: “The man who shares and gives, rejoices and feels more satisfaction than the one who receives and this procures salvation for himself or herself.”³⁵ The suffering of the sick man himself is God’s way to ask for our love.

Tormented by burning suffering and having their spirit frozen by the cold of loneliness, some of our neighbors pass away unaccompanied, without the touch of a comforting hand and the voice or the silent presence of a person who cares. This is why our nature is both physical and spiritual, so that, in addition to addressing physical needs, we can comfort the sick while experiencing suffering, while passing through trials and adversities. A good Christian considers the suffering of his neighbor to be his or hers. Doing so, the exhortation of a post-apostolic writer “You will love your neighbor more than your

³⁴ St. John Damascene, “Oratio de hisqui in fide dormierunt”, *Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Graeca*, 95 (1864), col. 269D.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, col. 268A.

own spirit”³⁶ will determine further action in the faithful’s lives. The Fathers of the Church conclude that there is no better acquaintance with God than the man who lives for the benefit of those around him or her. This is why God has endowed us with the ability to speak, hands, legs, physical strength, reason, and skills that all these should not be used exclusively to provide for ourselves and salvation, but for our neighbor’s benefit.

Serving one’s neighbor is a duty for all Christians, according to the strength of each of them. Serving one’s neighbor is a prerequisite as it results in the way the Last Judgment will occur when we are asked what we did for the least of Christ’s, serving our neighbor is essential for eternal salvation or doom.

As we have already stated, on the bed of suffering, Christians and every man, in general, needs more than ever attention, support, encouragement, and care from all those around him or her. In our day, many of our neighbors remain alone in their suffering, away from their families and deserted by friends, and die in cold, impersonal hospital rooms. Loving presence at their bedside is beneficial as it brings benefits that no one can even comprehend.

³⁶ Barnaba, "Epistola", chap. XIX, 5, in *Scrierile Părinților Apostolici*, translation, notes and indexes by Ph. D. Fr. Dumitru Fecioru (Bucharest: IBMBOR Publishing, 1995), p. 162.