

Martyrs without Scars: Disabled Bodies and the Orthodox Eschatological Imaginary

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A distinguishing feature of Orthodox Christianity is that it communicates its theology by visual and other sensorial modes. Whenever someone enters an Orthodox church, she finds herself surrounded by images of Christ, the Theotokos, and an impressive number of saintly figures. Even images of the local bishop or important donors may be present. Icons often serve as a starting point for explaining Orthodoxy to other Christians or nonbelievers. Their function is more than that of illustrating the life of Christ and the saints. They are gates to heaven and depictions of our ultimate eschatological goal: union with God or deification. The gold surrounding the heads of the saints and their translucent, almost diaphanous, bodies are meant to represent the light of their eschatological communion with God.

What might surprise those interested in understanding the relationship of Orthodox theology with human embodiment is not just the uniform way in which the bodies of the saints are depicted, but also the absence of any signs of disability. Even martyrs who were tortured to death in the most unimaginable ways do not show scars. Icons often account for the disabling treatment endured at the hands of their executioners by representing the

saints holding in one hand the main instrument with which they were tortured. Their bodies, however, remain beautiful and unscathed.

The main reason for this is that icons present us with an eschatological vision of the saint, and traditional patristic consensus tends towards a vision of the eschaton in which all wounds will be healed, all scars removed, and, somewhat implicitly, all disability will disappear. The following argument seeks to point out why some of these assumptions are theologically problematic, and in so doing calls for a re-evaluation of certain aspects of Orthodox visual imagery. In order to address this problem, it is first necessary to look at how and why praying and hoping for the healing of all illnesses is not the same as praying for the healing of all disabilities, a point which leads to a discussion of the potential importance of disability for our eschatological identity.

Any Orthodox Christian who is gravely ill, or has a sick relative or friend, has probably attended the sacrament of holy unction, in which several priests pray, read seven excerpts from the gospels, and bless oil for the recovery of those in suffering. It feels natural to pray for our healing and for

that of those close to us, and this practice is found and endorsed by several New Testament writings (for example, James 5:14). So, why wouldn't we envision eschatological life with Christ as one in which everyone is healed?

Here, it is important to distinguish a disability that has been integrated into one's life from an illness that provokes suffering. Recent scholarship by disability rights advocates insists that limitations in performing certain physical and cognitive tasks are not connected to suffering unless these limitations are stigmatized by the surrounding society.¹ For example, persons with Down syndrome are regularly placed in the category of the disabled, but they are often healthy individuals who live fulfilled lives. There are indeed some health-related issues linked with it, but, in itself, Down syndrome does not entail physical suffering, or in any case not of the kind that would require our prayers for its healing or alleviation. Or take the example of someone who was injured by war and had to have her legs amputated. Her mobility limitation is not a source of physical suffering and, despite the mental trauma of the war, she lives a good life with the necessary support of family, friends, and her local community. In some cases, all the support really needed is relief from the pitying or uncomfortable regards of others. Thus, praying for someone's release from pain can be different from praying for them to be cured of a disability. The two can converge, and often they do, but the distinction should be kept in mind, particularly when discussing eschatology.

Early Christians were faced with the challenge of articulating not only how the fleshly body could be resurrected at the end of time, but also how one

might speak about the same person once the body is changed. How could a body that decayed and became dust, was eaten by animals, or was burned at the stake be resurrected and remain the same person? Could someone with a body made of different elements than flesh, be it even a spiritual body, be identical to the person she was before her death? Athenagoras struggled with these questions in the second century. In his work *On the Resurrection of the Dead*, he claimed that even bodies eaten and digested by wild animals will be reconstructed, because the omnipotent God who created the human being and the universe was able "to separate that which has been broken up and distributed among a multitude of animals of all kinds which are wont to have recourse to such bodies, and glut their appetite upon them—to separate this, I say, and unite it again with the proper members and parts of members, whether it has passed into some one of those animals, or into many, or thence into others, or, after being dissolved along with these, has been carried back again to the original elements."² This was necessary to happen "since the law of nature ordains the end not absolutely, nor as the end of any men whatsoever, but of the same men who passed through the previous life; but it is impossible for the same men to be reconstituted unless the same bodies are restored to the same souls."³

The presupposition behind the resurrection that remained mostly unquestioned was that the martyrs will be resurrected with perfect bodies, without any scars. As Candida Moss points out, with the exception of Augustine and a few others, the consensus among the fathers was that everything will be healed and the bodies of the martyrs will return to a perfectly healthy state.⁴ The view was cultural-

¹ Tom Shakespeare, *Disability: The Basics* (London: Routledge, 2018), 3–23.

² Athenagoras, *On the Resurrection of the Dead* 3, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, v. 2, trans. B.P. Pratten, ed. Alexander Roberts, Hames Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, rev. Kevin Knight, <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0206.htm>.

³ Athenagoras, *On the Resurrection of the Dead* 25. See Caroline Walker Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200–1336* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019).

ly determined by the association between virtue and bodily integrity that dominated their worldview. As Kristi Upson-Saia puts it:

Informed by physiognomy—the science of physical appearance—Greeks and Romans held that the disposition of the soul showed itself on the surface of the body through physical signs. It was possible, therefore, to interpret an individual’s character and temperament purely from his or her physical appearance. According to physiognomic taxonomies, beauty and virtue were inextricably linked, so that one man’s handsome, well-proportioned looks were evidence of his praiseworthy character, while another man’s ugliness and deformities were proof of his depravity and immorality.⁵

For the fathers, such a view was facilitated by the cultural context in which they lived, where the marks on someone’s body (such as tattoos, brands, scars, amputated limbs) were generally assumed to be the consequences of punishment for criminal activities. To defend this standpoint today places us squarely in the camp of a biological determinism where our morality is indissolubly linked to or defined by our bodies. This runs contrary to our everyday experience, where persons considered beautiful can be highly immoral and persons considered ugly can be paragons of virtue.

This interpretation of the eschaton in which all will be healed also avoids the complications posed by certain New Testament passages. In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul states quite forcefully the centrality of Christ’s resurrection for the faith, claiming that “if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain” (14).

He also argues that Christ is the new Adam who recapitulates in himself the entirety of humanity, but that unlike Adam, through whom death came into the world, through Christ comes life for all. The resurrected Christ is “the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep” (20).⁶ For some disability theologians, such as Nancy Eiesland, Kimberly Ann Willis, and Candida Moss, Paul speaks here not only of the inauguration of the kingdom of God by Christ, but also about the paradigmatic character of his resurrection.⁷ Just as Christ is resurrected, so will we be, and just as he bears the signs of his suffering on the cross, so shall we. This latter interpretation draws on the story of Thomas in John 20. Thomas is skeptical about Jesus’s rising from the dead and affirms in front of all the others that he will not believe it until he puts his “finger in the mark of the nails” and his hand into the wound of the spear (25). The following week, Jesus appears through the closed doors and allows Thomas to feel the marks of the nails and the wound in his side. Moss writes: “If Jesus is recognized by his wounds, then should we not imagine that the resurrection of everyone else will similarly preserve pre-mortem marks, and by extension, all kinds of infirmities?”⁸

The point behind the question is not to compare persons with disabilities to martyrs, but to show that we should postulate a sort of continuity between our bodies in this world and those in the eschaton. Not only because Christ, who is the pattern of our resurrection, keeps the scars of the nails, but also because, without bodily continuity, the eschatological self would be significantly altered. As Tertullian puts it in his forceful rhetorical style: “For how absurd, and in truth how unjust, and in both respects how unworthy of God, for one substance to do the

⁴ Candida R. Moss, *Divine Bodies: Resurrecting Perfection in the New Testament and Early Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), 25.

⁵ Kristi Upson-Saia, “Resurrecting Deformity: Augustine on Wounded and Scarred Bodies in the Heavenly Realm,” in *Disability in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam: Sacred Texts, Historical Traditions, and Social Analysis*, ed. Darla Y. Schumm and Michael Stoltzfus (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 101.

⁶ See Moss, *Divine Bodies*, 11–14.

⁷ Nancy L. Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994); Kimberly Anne Willis, “‘Fearsome Possibility’: Towards a Contextual Christology of Disability,” in *Gender, Ethnicity, and Religion: Views from the Other Side*, ed. Rosemary Radford Ruether (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 215–29.

⁸ Moss, *Divine Bodies*, 25.

The Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian, Greece, 18th c.



⁹ Tertullian, *On the Resurrection of the Flesh* 56, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, v. 3, trans. Peter Holmes, rev. Kevin Knight, <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0316.htm>.

¹⁰ John Swinton, *Finding Jesus in the Storm: The Spiritual Lives of Christians with Mental Health Challenges* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020), 211.

work, and another to reap the reward: that this flesh of ours should be torn by martyrdom, and another wear the crown; or, on the other hand, that this flesh of ours should wallow in uncleanness, and another receive the condemnation!"⁹

To understand this problem of discontinuity of identity, consider the case of persons with Down syndrome. If in the eschaton they were cured, then one might claim that we were dealing with different persons; not radically new ones, but different ones. In this case, Tertullian's point would carry even more weight: other people re-

ceiving the reward for things they did not actually do.

There is of course the possibility that all this healing occurs in stages, that there is a continuous transformation of our bodies in God's presence, enabling the concomitant development of our identity, as is often the case during our lives when our bodies change due to old age. But this possibility raises the question: how accepting of bodily and intellectual differences is heaven, really, if every disability is cured, even those where no pain is involved and for whom a real sense of identity is attached?

The solution might be to understand healing more in a spiritual than a medical sense, not as the removal of scars or the standardization of bodies but as the re-establishment of a right relationship with God and our neighbours. As John Swinton points out, “Scripture has no equivalent term for biomedical understandings of health that equate health with the absence of illness. The closest term is the Hebrew *shalom*, which has a core meaning of righteousness, holiness, right relationship with God.”¹⁰

Swinton’s position partially echoes that of Augustine regarding the scars of the martyrs. For Augustine, the beauty of the resurrected bodies is not physical—resting on the proportionality of various physical elements—but ascetic. In this fallen world, the relationship between God’s will and the human body, soul, and will is unbalanced. The human will is moved by bodily pleasures and comfort, disobeying the will of God and the desire of the soul for God. As Upson-Saia puts it, the martyrs, “by willingly submitting to and valiantly enduring martyrdom,” illustrate

a proper ordering of the body-soul-will, which were rightly calibrated with God’s will. Martyrs’ deformities, therefore, are no longer to be interpreted as evidence of the corruptible substance of material bodies (corruptibility that lacks beautiful symmetry and thus should be obliterated in the resurrection), but rather as evidence that the martyrs had overcome the corruption of the disordered body-soul-will.¹¹

Hence, the uncreated energies irradiating from the saints, the haloes with which they are represented in icons, are not meant to show the per-

fect symmetry of their bodies or their perfect health, but the beauty of their moral stature, of their right relationship with God.

One might object that not everyone has a positive relationship with her disability. Some would like to have their disabilities removed in the eschaton. This is an excellent insight, and it is very difficult to speak of a uniform experience of disability, let alone define it. It seems a convincing argument, however, that the relationship with our disabilities will be different under the eschatological light and that the fullness of God’s presence will not mean the beginning of a medical healing process, but a dialogue of love, in which disability can have its place or not, according to our relationship with it. This objection, however, does not undermine the main point of this article, namely that we should have iconographic representations of saints with disabilities or at least martyrs with scars. If we can imagine that some would like their disabilities removed from them, then we can imagine just as well that some would like to keep them because they consider them part of their identity. Thus, icons of saints with disabilities would remain faithful to the diversity of ways humans relate to their bodies.

It may be argued that this goes against the patristic consensus and introduces concepts foreign to their vision, such as disability. While both points could be conceded, it is also possible to challenge this understanding of tradition and hermeneutics. The main reason is that the argument for the presence of disability in the eschaton is also a legitimate reading of Scripture and tradition. It is reasonable to believe that if Christ is the yardstick for our resurrection,

¹¹ Upson-Saia, “Resurrecting Deformity,” 106.

¹² Petre Maican, “Dumitru Stăniloae et l’interprétation des Pères de l’Église dans un contexte œcuménique,” *Contacts* 266 (April–June 2019): 190–214.

and he preserved the scars of the nails in his resurrected body—as much of the Orthodox iconographic tradition attests—then it is quite likely that our eschatological bodies will keep their scars and disabilities. The understanding of healing as the re-establishment of the right relationship between body-soul-will and God’s will is also deeply grounded in Scripture and the Patristic writings. Thus, both the belief in the eschatological healing of all disabilities and the belief in their preservation may be of equal value. A strong argument in favour of the latter is supported by one of the hermeneutical principles of Dumitru Stăniloae, namely that between two possible interpretations of tradition—when we are not talking about fundamental dogma—we should always choose the one that increases community and strengthens the love for our neighbour.¹²

For Stăniloae, the Church is in a continuous dialogue with Christ through history. This dialogue reveals to the Church a more profound understanding of the tradition (including Scripture, dogma, and the patristic writings). This profound understanding is not meant simply to increase our vain intellectual knowledge of God, but to sustain our growth in love for Christ and others. In the eschaton, Stăniloae argues, the entire creation will become part of the Church—that is to say, a space for communion between humans and God. The vocation of the Church in history is to prepare—as

much as possible—the path for the fulfilment of this eschatological reality. Theologians are meant to contribute to this goal not simply through lives of holiness, but also by expounding the tradition in this eschatological sense. Hence, when faced with an interpretative conundrum, the theologian should always choose the option that contributes to the strengthening of love between the faithful. By opting to represent the saints with disabilities and martyrs with scars, we remain inside the tradition, while moving towards the realisation of the eschatological goal of the Church.

Representing saints with disabilities is a legitimate theological option grounded on the biblical texts in which we are told that Christ kept the scars of the nails even in his resurrected body. It is also supported by the biblical and patristic view of healing as the restoration of a right relationship between body-soul-will and God. This appeal, however, is not a question of charity and integration, but one of advancement of the Church in eschatological love for one another in Christ. Paramount to this purpose, as we know from almost all other relationships, is the acceptance of differences. In a highly visual faith like ours, out of sight means out of mind. Representing disability is, then, a first and necessary step in reminding us of the variety of embodiments that exist in this world, and of all the different bodies recapitulated in Christ for eternal life. ✱

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