Enterprise of fasting and vocation of a physician

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SUMMARY

In this paper, the author considers the enterprise of fasting, in which the man faces the important issues of his existence, the purpose and worldly life. The author is aware that all social, philosophical and theological phenomena are very complex, profound and obscure and quotes the French philosopher and scientist Pascal, who claimed: “We do not possess enough knowledge to...understand the life of human body...While in nature everything is closely interwoven...” No part can be recognized unless we have studied the unit. The life of each body will be understood only when we learn all that it needs; and in order to achieve this, it is necessary to study the universe. But the universe is infinite and it is beyond the human ability to grasp it...”

It is clear from this quotation that we are facing many complex issues whenever we try to reveal one of the secrets of Christian life – the secret of fasting. The second part of the essay has to do with people and the time we live in, the relations between believing doctors and their profession and whether and to what extent a believing doctor who observes fasts is closer to the Truth and Goodness that the one who does not believe. The author argues that the doctor who is a believer and who observes a fast seeing it as the time when values of human life should be put to test and the meaning of medical profession reconsidered is closer to the truth of Existence and love of the world. There is no duty that is more important for a modern, egotistic, materialistic man than resuming fasts. A fast as a profound rethinking of the whole of a human being, as a human effort, as Solzhenitsyn would say, to self-restriction, abstinence, nurturing of his own freedom.

Key words: Fasting; Religion; Physicians; Health; Philosophy; Ethics

1 “God emerges like the light from each created thing, from each form of life that moves...” He is like the warmth in the breath of everything that lives.” (Ivo Andric)

2 It may appear equally easy and hard to clarify the meaning of the enterprise of fasting undertaken by those who believe. All people of faith seem to know what it is about. However, the problem with respect to people is that the most difficult questions turn to be those to which every man apparently knows the answer in advance and that the answer as such is taken for granted. But it is not like that at all. “As soon as we ask a question, we acknowledge our own ignorance, for if we knew we would not ask” wise Aristotle asserted. A fast is a symbol of truly regulated life and the human faith in the world's eternal order. A fast leads the people and community to the order of the universe and the divine order of the world, helping them to avoid chaos, disorder and decline. „The most sacred act to be imagined is to turn disorder to order, chaos to universe: it is... the beginning of the God's creation of the world! There is no stronger representation in the human spirit than this...the feeling of order is guaranteed from the supreme position and it provides the basis for the way we think, what we believe and do...” Śušnjić claims: “The man has always feared...disorder in nature, society and spirit...When the man finds out, creates and imposes some sort of order around himself and inside himself, he overcomes the fear of unknown. In an ordered world, internal and external, the man feels safer. Thus, every system of ideas, beliefs and values... proves to be the defense against disorder...Our whole culture is a victory over disorder...” A fast means the introduction of order into the community”. “The world can be understood if it is in a proper order... No prediction...planning or policy making is possible in the state of disorder...Religion is a mighty shield against disorder in nature, society and spirit...” Fasting is an important step in achieving the purpose of life of those who believe. Many have talked and written on the Christian practice of fasting, but the Holy Fathers of the Church of Christ, who lived and acted the way they preached, surely have to be mentioned. Their words

1 “If we compare all the known societies and cultures, we will find in every place and in every time people solving the same problems, responding to the same challenges, asking the same questions...” Djuro Susnjic, Drama razumevanja, Cigoja stampe, Beograd, 2004, p. 215 and 220.

2 St. John Chrysostom (speaking on the change occurring after a fast) emphasized: “Doesn’t fast offer...the real wealth? Peace and serenity are everywhere; were not our homes free of rush, turmoil and noise...? But now, all has changed: from the morning one can hear commotion, shouting and pounding of cooks, and there is turbulence in our souls, because entertainment stirs internal passions and fuels the flame of sinful wishes...we should be sorry that fast that restrained all this has gone...” Fast is an arrangement, order and harmony of the soul and body, of the man and his community.

3 Dj. Susnjic, ibid, p.171.

4 Dj. Susnjic, ibid, p.168.

5 “What is the impact of fast on social life? It makes the whole city and...people obedient calming turmoil, settling disputes and bringing gosposi to an end...” Should everyone accept it for the counsellor in what they do, there would be no hindrance for peace to rule the universe: nations would not rise against each other nor armies would fight...so that it could teach everyone not only to refrain from food but also from any vice...then nothing would prevent us from living our life in a complete peace without disturbance in spirit and mind.” St. Vasilije the Great: The Second Sermon on Fast, borrowed from the book Sveti Vasilije Veliki-Besedne, Hilendar, 2002.

6 Dj. Susnjic, Drama Razumevanja, p. 170-171.
came close to the truth, for their life corroborated the words they were saying, and their words confirmed their spiritual life. In the present global world, words have lost their credibility, because they do not essentially stand for the man, life and Truth. Words are used for their own purpose and serve human lies and social deceptions. When the present cannot respond to our needs, wishes and wants, “in the moments when we feel that we are losing control…we instinctively grab the things that until then we even did not know we knew or had them. The experiences and habits of our ancestors that were dug deep and that we did not even know they were living in us are suddenly rising in front of us.” Once again, the man turns to God, fasting, prayer and hope of eternal life and there he searches for his salvation from eternal fears and terrors of soul.

A question arises as to why the man fasts and what the purpose of fasting is. It is not our business to talk about fasting from the point of view of theology, but to ask those who know and whose experience in prayers and fasting exceeds our experience, the experience of ordinary people, to help us. Speaking about fasting, according to the teachings by the fathers of the church and the books of the Old and New Testament, all started with man’s original sin. What is the essence and meaning of the original commandment: “Of every tree of the garden you may eat, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat.” God has given nature and matter to men to use them, but he has not resolved their misuse for them. The original commandment is the first appeal to the man to establish a correct relation to himself, to God, matter and nature. The original commandment stands as a test of his freedom, his will, and his attitude. God says that the man may use nature, creation, but in the way consistent with nature and the man’s eternal purpose. As a being who has his own standards of truth and purpose; 2) from outside - from the point of view of a researcher who evaluates religious utterances and rites based on his science and philosophy…each issue in question should be considered carefully from both points of view, from inside and from outside. This inside means that only a believer can have the true experience of faith. This outside means: one who does not believe can also talk about religion…But each researcher has to know that a genuine representative of his own religious tradition can say more than anyone else on the firsthand experience…” Dj. Susnjač, Ibid, p.186.

7 Religion can be investigated: 1) from inside - from the point of view of a believer, who has his own standards of truth and purpose; 2) from outside - from the point of view of a researcher who evaluates religious utterances and rites based on his science and philosophy…each issue in question should be considered carefully from both points of view, from inside and from outside. This inside means that only a believer can have the true experience of faith. This outside means: one who does not believe can also talk about religion…But each researcher has to know that a genuine representative of his own religious tradition can say more than anyone else on the firsthand experience…” Dj. Susnjač, Ibid, p.186.

8 Theologian Radovan Bigović asserts: “Language is a living thing. Throughout history words change their meanings. This is the time of word inflation, the age of language decadence. Many human words have been re-evaluated and lost their meaning. The beauty of language and words is an impossible theme where shameless liars triumph.”

9 Andrić, I., Omerpasa Lataš, Sabrana dela, Svetlost, Sarajevo, 1981, p.148

10 The temptation of food was offered to Christ in the desert. To that temptation, the temptation that Eva had failed to resist, the word of Christ was heard as a response: “A man does not live on bread only, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God”. This was Christ’s victory over the temptation that Eva had failed to resist.

11 St. Vasilije the Great: “Do not limit the virtue of fast to food only. The genuine fast is not only in abstaining various food, but in rejecting passions and sins: not to do injustice to anyone, to forgive the fellow man for insulting you or for the evil he has inflicted upon you…” St. John of the Ladder, a great ascetic, informs on his experience of fast: “…When the stomach is hungry, the heart is at peace. And when one indulges the stomach, he starts thinking in an arrogant way. Be aware that the demon often sits in the stomach preventing the man from fasting fully, even if he eats the whole of Misr (Egypt) and drink up the Nile…” John Cassian on fast: “We should not believe that in order to achieve the perfection of heart and the purity of body, one needs to observe fast that includes refraining from food…” We, while fasting bodily, get caught in a net of spiritual passions, then exhaustion of body will not bring any benefits on us”.

12 Fast is present in almost all monotheistic religions. The Old and New Testament often refers to fast.

himself on fasting, he has no peace, no any benefit from fasting." Justin Popovic teaches as regards fasting: "By fasting - in the fast of soul and body- soul fasts from every sin … malice … envy… malevolence… gossiping…lust…money-grabbing...The fast of body is refraining from food. The body fasts not to fuel passions in it, but to calm them down. A fast is not only abstinenence of any evil acts, but it is at the same time the practice of all sacred virtues. When Lord wanted to prescribe a remedy, the remedy that cured all the sins, He announced to His Disciples: "This kind is expelled through prayers and fasts." St Ephraim Syrian said that fasts bring prayers to the heaven.

The monks of Visoki Dečani Monastery think about fasting in the following way: "The life of every Christian has to be accomplished with fasts. Without the efforts of our soul and body, supported by the grace of God, it would be impossible to get rid of the force of sin and get united with Lord… God's commandment on fasting was issued to our forefather Adam in the Garden of Eden. Only when he broke the commandment of fasting, Adam fell in lustfulness and pride… People have fasted in every misfortune and sorrow, in dangers of war and bereavement…whenever the grace of God was to be implored… ancient prophets taught that God is not pleased with the fast of body unless it is accompanied by absti-

14 We quote some thoughts by the wise men of Church: "the purpose of fasting, as abstinence of body, is not only to ensure self-control, rule of mind over matter, restraining and subdual of rebellious nature, but a practical denial of the possibility that body and its desires can be the goal in itself...(P. Janaras)." "Fast…in its ontological scale, is the basis for all goods, defence of every virtue and principles of spiritual efforts, and the wrath of absti-

15 "When you see a poor man, give him some alms. If you face your enemy, reconcile with him…So, do not fast with your stomach only, but also with your eyes and ears, arms and legs...Put your hearing on fast avoiding listening to gossips and intrigues. Fast with your mouth and tongue refraining from saying bad words… What is the use of not eating meat or fish, when we bite and devour our fellow men?"

The wise people who understand and comprehend the secrets of human life and the duration of the universe arising are whether they can be connected and whether there is a conflict between theology and science. The wise people think, leaves desolation and emptiness behind, resulting in the naked reality devoid of authentic human values, in which the man is deprived of the therapeutic and healing power of religious illusions, while being offered the harsh and cold reality of rational technology lacking freedom, where a lonely mob and narrow-minded individuals live. While cherishing the belief in the limitless power and humane mission of science, rationalists fail to take into consideration an important principle: it is inhuman to take religion away from a believer who desperately needs it. Materialist philosophy has an extremely negative attitude to religion, which is often viewed as a form of ideological superstructure, the reins to control people, a cry of a human being in pain, expression of man’s lack of power when facing unpredictable nature, fantastic representation in people’s heads. But the man is not only a being of practice; he is also the being who needs faith, love, illusions. The man is limited but he aspires to grow over all the limits; he is mortal but he aspires to immortality; though impermanent he wants to leave a permanent mark.

In his consideration of the spirit of the first half of 20th century, the Russian theologian Eugene Spektorsky points to the spiritual crisis of humankind caused by the crises of notions and truths that have been believed in, especially the notions of naturalism and materialism as “indis-

16 "…the contemporary world is facing new…unknown threats. The most important among them are: uncontrolled escalation of armed conflicts, global economic crises, international terrorism, proliferation of nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction, enormous increase in drug-trafficking, illegal immigration that oca-

17 Spektorsky E. "Moderna naouka i vera", "Bratstvo", br.11-12, November-December 1932, p.149.
than we are normally prepared to admit”. Christian teaching is not a rival to individual science, since the Christian theory of cognition is “spatial application of serious methods, tests and research papers”. In his analysis of the Bible, Spektorsky argues that Jesus Christ applied scientific ways of thinking in many cases: not only that he did not ignore formal logic, but he used it in his discussions with writers and the Pharisees. He did not oppose making tests and he said: “we speak about the things we know, and witness the things we see” (John III, 11). He kept telling those with eyes and ears to look and listen (Marc VIII, 18). The First Epistle of St. John begins as follows: “That which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have examined… we are declaring to you” (John 1,1,3). The knowledge of God and knowledge in general, is a recurrent theme in the New Testament. Spektorsky says that Christianity has contributed to correct understanding of natural phenomena; it has provided methodological guidelines as to how to get to know the man by pointing to his physical, intellectual and spiritual aspects. Christ believed in medicine – “he cured people from all diseases with the faith” (Mat. 4: 23-24); but he thought that the sick should see the physician and the wounded should be given medical treatment first (Matthew 9: 12; Luke 5: 31; 10:24). There are many opinions that are consistent with Spektorsky’s ideas regarding the relation between science and religion.

Unfortunately, there is almost nothing left that the modern man has not deprived of sense, discouraged or humiliated, including even the man himself, scientific achievements and dedicated work of outstanding individuals. That is why this world is in search of a new Christ-like love, which may offer the genuine hope that we are not falling into decay23. “The crisis of our age is not only …economic… political, but it is also spiritual and moral: the ties with …the spiritual foundations and key values of life… have been cut off! The universal ideas and values have been pushed aside by…interests…”24 If physicians and other people with professions important for society put forward the argument that this state of affairs has been built on wealth24, and has not been enlightened by faith, hope or love, they would act like a soldier that complained that he could not help but be defeated in his place, but if any other place might be awarded to him he would be the winner. We people do not have any other place, nor do we have a new life or a better time than the one we live in, and therefore we have to make good deeds and put efforts here and now since this is our best time and best place.

With the collapse of various ideologies, both on the right and the left on the political spectrum, which claimed dozen million lives, the man of the last and present century has found himself suddenly in an empty and unknown space, living a life devoid of hope, and surrounded by absurdity and desperation. But we should not forget that the sources of the spirit of philosophy and man’s wondering about the purpose are to be found in such a state of agitation (Jaspers), suffering (Dostoyevsky), anxiety and tremor (Kjerkegor), state of concern (Heidegger), nausea (Sartre) and all borderline states that a man can go through such as crisis, illness, death, emptiness, desolate soul. The philosopher Leszek Kolakowski thinks that the crisis of civilization is grounded in the aspiration to found and interpret human culture and society on the rational basis only. “The tendency toward overwhelming rationalization makes the man lose his footing so when we follow or participate in …the discussions on devastating consequences …of secularization of the western civilization, continuing disappearance of religious heritage and the sad scene of the godless world we are gripped by a strong and humiliating feeling…”25 He argues that the world that has forgotten about God cannot make the distinction between good and evil; it annuls any purpose in human life and sinks in nihilism. Having considered futility of attempts by the contemporary man at overcoming the present situation, he concludes that no positive change is possible “except within the traditional religious heritage of humankind.”26 It is one of the possible ways for the contemporary man to overcome the spiritual crisis. It should be noted that opposite the faith, Christian mercy, asceticism and stoicism27 there stands the ideology of contemporary liberal capitalism propagating egotism, self-sufficiency, corporeality, grabbing and hoarding, unsparing competition in the market of opposing wills of the world. Where can such a world be heading if not toward conflicts, wars, uncertainty and destruction of culture and all that has been achieved so far. Our age is the time of a great historical deception and manipulation of people and nations because the words such as democracy, humanism, altruism, socialism, cosmopolitism, pacifism are nothing more than a verbal front wall hiding egotistic instincts behind it. “I am not against the society of the world…globalization…but, I am not sure that the processes that are annihilating the idea of a free man can create anything important or useful… what we are witnessing is a mere prelude to the worldwide slavery … and the absolute control of all conditions on Earth… by a narrow circle of globally rich people…”28 However, to whatever extent the relations in the world may provide ground for pessimism, the man must not give up
the world and surrender. Theologian Bigović, speaking on his book Church in modern world, said some important things about the world, man and challenges of our age: “There is less Christian spirit, ethos and morality… There are more challenges: secularism, globalization, moral relativism… How can ethics of love and service be established in 21st century?… How can one defeat egotism and open one’s heart, the whole being, to God and people… How can one live for others not for oneself… In an era of hyper-individualism, when all communities are breaking apart, how can one build a community and the spirit of fellowship… What harms our spiritual health most? The fake way of existence… The faked spiritualism…”

This is our world and our time.

No doubt that for a man to achieve great, important and excellent results, and reach heights in his profession, he first needs to establish order, peace and harmony within himself, then with other people, and finally with his surrounding and wider community. The best way to achieve this is to do what our faithful ancestors always did — to fast⁹, since fasts always enable spiritual to rule over corporeal, order over chaos, disorder and wandering, things that are culturally and socially desirable over those that are natural, instinctive, unrestrained in the man. Fasting strengthens endurance, persistence, patience and tolerance with the man as opposed to the current aspirations toward fast successes, ruthless competition and general impatience. To practice science, medical profession or educational work implies that the man controls himself and general impatience. To practice science, medical profession or wandering, things that are culturally and socially desirable over those that are natural, instinctive, unrestrained in the man. Fasting strengthens endurance, persistence, patience and tolerance with the man as opposed to the current aspirations toward fast successes, ruthless competition and general impatience. No doubt that for a man to achieve great, important and excellent results, and reach heights in his profession, he first needs to establish order, peace and harmony within himself, then with other people, and finally with his surrounding and wider community. The best way to achieve this is to do what our faithful ancestors always did — to fast⁹, since fasts always enable spiritual to rule over corporeal, order over chaos, disorder and wandering, things that are culturally and socially desirable over those that are natural, instinctive, unrestrained in the man. Fasting strengthens endurance, persistence, patience and tolerance with the man as opposed to the current aspirations toward fast successes, ruthless competition and general impatience. To practice science, medical profession or educational work implies that the man controls himself⁹, his instinctive parts and stray parts of his soul, to keep himself straight, moral, honest and armed with love. This is the best way for a physician to become the person celebrated by the ill and the forthcoming time. The path that leads to stars is difficult and tiresome to take and under the constellation of the great there is little place for ordinary people. Fasting helps ordinary people grow to distinguish individuals of human race. Fasting is desirable, valuable and useful since the man through asceticism⁹, abstinence and good thoughts and acts of love returns to the patterns of religion and order in himself and the community he belongs to. Without commitment to the vocation and love to others and patients a physician cannot achieve any really valid success either in medical science or in medical practice.

Sincere, deep and true prayers, practicing the feat of fasting that means introduction of order to the souls of believing physicians¹⁰ have many times proved their great values. Knowing the complex and demanding nature of medical profession and all exceptional personal characteristics that a physician should possess, one may say that introduction and cherishing of spiritual asceticism and self-discipline can effectively and benevolently affect the work of a physician so that it is done to excellence, while all hardships and spiritual, emotional, ethical and human challenges of medical practice become easier to face. The man who faces death of other people, even the beloved one every day has to be armed with many virtues and gifts to stand up to the requirements of his human and professional tasks. Physicians who always do this know how difficult and demanding it is and how much human and cosmic strength it requires. By his profession a physician, as an important social person, belongs to himself least and much more and almost completely to the community in which he works and to the people who make up that community. Therefore, one may say to a physician, like to a soldier, priest, judge and teacher: “If a man thinks about himself only and looks only for his own benefit, he cannot be happy. If you really want to live for yourself, live for others!”¹⁰ The famous Roman philosopher and emperor Marcus Aurelius wrote on the extent to which a man depends on the community and people: “Even if you would like to, you cannot separate your life from the life of humankind. You live in it, with it and for it. And since you live among living people you cannot deny yourself, for we were all born for reciprocity… and reciprocity is impossible without self-denial.” Self-denial is the second name for fasting, abstinence, patience and devotion of a man to the community. A physician is responsible for the death of his patient, whether he failed to administer medicine or he administered wrong medicine, inappropriate to the illness. The physician’s vocation is connected with knowledge as much as with ethics¹⁰. “The fact that the physician is in close contact with people requires him to have a deep understanding of people’s attitudes, motivation and behavior. The physician’s skill is making diagnosis and providing treatment; his responsibility for you do not feed it with life-saving and life-creating teaching…in a battle giving help to one leads to defeat of the other. And those who choose the body and let it overcome the spirit…because they oppose each other (Gal. 5.17)…if you want to invigorate your brain, restrain your body with fast…So many good things result from fasting! With gluttony, drunkenness, greediness… all other forms of animal non-restraint appear…Even drunkard’s nature gets perverted, so that he looks for a woman in a man, and for a man in a woman. Fasting, on the other hand, points to appropriateness in marriage affairs…”¹² “St Vasilije the Great: The First Sermon on Fasting.

A dying man is trying to run away from the burden of fear and the imminent end that he has to bear; it is the escape of a man from human cosmic loneliness. Fasting, prayers and hope, words and looks of sympathy, physician’s knowledge and faith are precious for a frightened and helpless man who is dying.
is the health of his patients…the physician can explain to his patient his needs…advise him how to face those needs and then to help him meet them…”36 Great knowledge is neither good or bad by itself, so those among us who excel the others have to be noble people. A physician must grapple with the problems of the profession, people, diseases and world and develop himself multiplying his intellectual capacities and moral values. They have to be acquired through effort and exertion. Physicians must always be aware that they should work “always as humans and never as non-humans”. (Serbian Patriarch Pavle)

Fast is equally important, needed and valuable for both physicians and patients, but most so for healthy people. Everyone knows, and physicians more than anyone else, that, in a short or long run, vices pose hazard to one’s health, which is the only real value and stable basis for human life. The man, as a being characterized by his free will, has to take responsibility for the state of his health and to restrain dangerous vices, in which fasting is of paramount importance.37 The medical vocation is among those professions that from time immemorial have been linked with moral challenges, ethic dilemmas, issues of existence and fears of community. It has never been easy for outstanding physicians to resolve the most complex issues of life and purpose of man’s existence. There will be no true revival of the human being or real moral, spiritual, economic, mental changes unless we return to fasting as a deep reconsideration of the human being, as a human effort, in the words of Solzhenitys, to self-restrain, abstinence, training of our own inner will, our freedom. The issue of fasting is the issue of the philosophy of life: the issue of revival of human mind and body, revival of the medical vocation, people’s health and the values of human community. Fast is the path of love toward the man.

Conflict of interest
We declare no conflict of interest.

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