



Enterprise of fasting and vocation of a physician

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SUMMARY

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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 intertwined ... 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 than 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

*„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 Andrić)*

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.¹ 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.² „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!...”³ Šušnjić 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...”⁴ A fast means the introduction of order into the community.⁵ “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...”⁶ 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 stampa, 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 gossips 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-Besede*, Hilandar, 2002.

6 Dj. Susnjic, *Drama Razumevanja*, p. 170-171.

came close to the truth⁷, for their life corroborated the words they were saying, and their words confirmed their spiritual life. In the present global world, words⁸ 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."⁹ 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 tremors 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"¹⁰. 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 more perfect than nature, the man cannot discover his perfection and reach the full strength of his being in nature that is less perfect than he is. There lies his fall, the fall of Adam and Eve, the fall of Man. As soon as he turns to nature, imbues it with God, imbues himself with God, then he takes food from nature to be the only one, and thinks that the creation is the source of knowledge of what is good and what is bad and the source of his deepest wisdom. Instead to the word and truth of God, the man turns to the material world as the only truth of life, declares that world

truth and God's words lies, thus falling to the deepest bottom where he forgets about life. Then, he becomes alienated from God, since the word of God is that mighty power that keeps the man to God. Therefore it is said: "The moment you taste it, you shall die". This means: at the moment you disobey the commandment, deny the word of God, which is your food and the original, primordial wisdom that enlightens your life and your destiny, you will alienate from God, you will fall in the world and you will not know who you are any more. The fall is a wrong attitude of the man toward himself, God and creation; the beginning of human revival is to retreat to the shelter of the word of God, to the eternal wisdom, and through that settlement to receive the eternal light that illuminates the path for the man and provides the right measure of his knowledge, behaviour and life. There cannot be salvation for men without God, and fasting is the way to gain the tranquillity and wisdom of life. Fasting does not mean a mere compliance with regulations and abstinence from some dishes. The first appeal of fasting is: "Brothers, let's fast in our soul and body"¹¹. The virtue and sin are conceived in man's heart, when they reach mind then they proceed to acts, when they turn to acts then it is the human body that executes them; therefore if the man sincerely wishes to get renewed, to change his attitude toward the creation around him, toward the secret on which he rests, he has to get fully engaged. The substantial change is the one to which the fast appeals as the return to fulfilling the original commandment. The fast is, in the first place, a change in the philosophy of life. Some authors see fasting¹² as the way that helps a Christian build his salvation. It consists of abstinence of some kinds of food, bad thoughts, wishes and deeds, multiplication of prayers, good works, and zeal in practicing Christian virtues. The Serbian Patriarch Pavle explained: „To put an effort to practice our faith through righteous and holy acts, and thus to get closer to God and prove equal to our ancestors who... entered the Kingdom of Heaven, which is our true Fatherland..."¹³ The goal of a fast is to purify body, but above all to glorify God. When fasting, Christians always remember Christ who suffered to save their souls. Nikolaj Velimirović wrote on fasting: „The purity of body and soul is gained by fasting. Fasts, prayers, alms are expression of faith, hope and love in practice. Inability to refrain from food is the source of all other disabilities. Fasting is an exercise of generosity. Fasts help man get his body and soul relieved of darkness and obesity. The body is becoming light and agile; the spirit is bright and cleared. If someone boasts with fasting...prides

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. Susic, *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 life triumphs."

9 Andric I., *Omerpasa Latas*, Sabrana dela, Svjetlost, Sarajevo, 1981, p.148

10 The temptation of food was offered to Christ in the desert. To that temptation, 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 feeling full, 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...if 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.

13 Patrijarh srpski Pavle, *Zivot po Jevandjelju*, Ars Libri, Beograd, 1998.

himself on fasting, he has no peace, no any benefit from fasting. "Justin Popović 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 abstinence 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 fasting¹⁴ in the following way: "The life of every Christian has to be accomplished with feats. 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 abstinence from wrongdoing, evil words and thoughts... Our Lord Jesus Christ himself fasted 40 days and nights before setting to preach the sermon on the arrival of the Kingdom of Heaven... The main goal of fasting is to purify soul and body from corporeal and spiritual passions and to glorify God. And St John Chrysostom taught us fasting¹⁵ ... At the time of fasts it is necessary to feed more our soul with prayers and words of God than our body with food and enjoyment. Lord teaches in the Gospel that evil spirits are expelled with fasts and prayers... Lord does not need our fasting or starvation, we need them to soften our hearts, and calm them down... to become capable of receiving the grace of God."

Speaking about fasting and physician's vocation, the first questions that arise are whether they can be connected and whether there is a conflict between theology and science. The wise people who understand and comprehend the secrets of human life and the duration of the universe know well that science and theology neither contradict each other nor are they at odds. On the contrary, if science and theology, medical profession and religion are not grasped in their depth and in a correct way, they will remain unknown, distant and alien to each other. But if the essence of

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 subduing of rebellious nature, but a practical denial of the possibility that body and its desires can be the goal in itself...(H. Janaras). "Fast ...in its ontological scale, is the basis for all goods, defence of every virtue and principles of spiritual efforts, and the wreath of abstinence, beauty...light...the mother of prayers and the source of wisdom, the teacher of silence...Who is indifferent to fast is slow and idle, incapable of any other feat...and he gives the victory over to Satan, who always defeats him because he is unarmed and engages in the battle without weapons..."(Isaac of Syria) Source: Kalenic,1/2008-Izdanie Sumadijske eparhije

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?"

science and the point of faith are truly realized, then the wholeness and unity in particularities become obvious. If science is approached only in a rational, superficial, pragmatic and exact manner, the limitation of science becomes apparent, especially when tackling the faith and religious phenomena, including the most profound religious issues such as fasting, prayers, resurrection and healing. The criticism of faith from the point of view of scientific, technological rationalism and pragmatism, as some 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 Eugenie 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 "indisputable truth" guaranteed by "absolute science." Given the turbulent influx of reality and hardships resulting from contemporary life¹⁶, Spektorsky assumes that the contemporary man cannot manage to exist without faith and asserts that due to the crisis of society he must be "incurably religious". Once again, the crisis in the world is reinforcing religion which is the only one capable of complementing relative scientific truths with its spiritual experience. "In this way, the contemporary social crisis reflects the transition toward the generation of new scientific achievements in a harmonic cooperation with religious awareness. Thus, we are looking forward to seeing a new relation between science and faith in the future."¹⁷ Spektorsky extends this relation to the connections between Christianity and science: "When we get a thorough insight into the New Testament, then we clearly start understanding that, in terms of the essence and methodology, there are more issues relating to scientific knowledge in it

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 occasionally evolves into slave-trafficking, incredible rise in trafficking of human organs and related to it abduction of people, piracy, criminalization of different areas of life, etc. In addition, there are industrial accidents and environmental issues that are taking up global character affecting general climate changes and accelerating deterioration of the quality of life". M. Mladenovic, J. Ponamareva, "Kina-Amerika-Rusija- globalni trougao 21. veka", Socioloski pregled, vol. XLV (2011), br.4 p. 460.

17 Spektorski E., *Moderna nauka 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 I,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: 23-24¹⁸), but he thought that the sick should see the physician and the wounded should be given medical treatment first (Matthew 9: 12¹⁹; Luke 5: 31; 10:24²⁰). There are many opinions that are consistent with Spektorsky's ideas regarding the relation between science and religion²¹.

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 decay²². "The crisis of our age is not onlyeconomic... 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..."²³ 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, cosmopolitanism, 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

18 ...people brought to him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures, and the paralyzed; and he healed them...

19 On hearing this, Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick".

20 He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. .. and took care of him.

21 A great number of physicists have rejected atheism and declared to be religious: Ampere, Becquerel, Volta, Galvani, Boyle, Galileo, Edison, Marconi, Newton, Ohm, Pascal, Röntgen, Pupin, and Tesla. Einstein argued that "in the contemporary materialistic time the greatest scientists are the most religious people". Louis Pasteur claimed: "I have studied nature a lot. Because of that I am as religious as any farmer from Brittany."

22 The secularization process was prompted by the contemporary man's voracious pursuit of wealth. The man is falling into ever deepening crisis the cure of which may be nothing else but the renewal of faith, tradition and spirituality. The world cannot rest only on the interests and inscrutable accumulation of wealth for the privileged minority, egotism of the rich and famous and violence of those without faith.

23 Dj. Susnjic, *Drama razumevanja*, Cigoja stampa, Beograd, 2004. p. 243-244.

24 Adam lost his faith in the Heaven...prophet Elias never said: Hunger prevents me from being obedient to God! Nor Emperor David said: The crown prevents me from being obedient to God!" Nikolaj Velimirovic, *Misli o dobru i zlu*, Art print, Novi Sad, 1999. p.69.

25 Lesek Kolakovski, *Moderno na beskonacnoj probi*, Zbornik, Novi Sad, 1987.p. 71.

26 Ibid, p. 22

27 We firmly believe that in such conditions any man or physician is in the state that brings him closer to the path of God, and the more he is devoted to fasting and prayers the more he feels harmony with himself and experience inner peace.

28 Drago Rucnov, *Od sablje do melema*, zapisi, Cigura print, Beograd, 2007. p. 138.

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 fast²⁹, 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 himself³⁰, 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 take³¹ 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 asceticism³², 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 physicians³³ 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!"³⁴ 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 ethics³⁵. "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

29 „Fasting is a companion of the righteous, the wisdom of life. Fasting made Moses a law-maker. Samuel is the child of fasting... Fasting brought up great Sampson. While it was helping him, enemies fell in thousands... (Judgment.14,6; 15,16; 16,3)... Elias closed the heaven with fasting for three years and six months (Emperor 17.1)... he prevented evil from further advance." St Vasilije the Great: The Second Sermon on Fasting

30 „Even the best health is subject to change and deterioration if nature has lost vigour and cannot bear the burden of obesity any more... Digestion disorders that ... accompany gluttons cause terrible diseases in the body. The one who is fasting has the colour of his face that is worthy of respect: the face is embellished with paleness of wisdom... his look is meek... his words are balanced, and his heart is pure. You keep gaining weight ... without being worried about exhaustion of your brain, 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. ... (1.p.7,5)...“ St Vasilije the Great: The First Sermon on Fasting.

31 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.

32 „Accordingly, as much as you take from your body, that much you will add to your soul to shine with spiritual health. The victory over an invisible enemy cannot be won by the strength of your body, but by persistence of your soul and endurance in hardships"...“ St Vasilije the Great: The Second Sermon on Fasting.

33 "The rein for passions is fasting... Beware of what is opposed to virtue... Fasting is a weapon of the courageous, school for the daring. Fasting repels temptation... Fasting is bravery in battles... Fasting brings prayers up to the heaven... Fasting is the mother of health. Fasting is the message for youth, embellishment for elderly people, and a good companion for travellers..." (St. Ephraim of Syria)

34 Lav Nikolajevic Tolstoj, *Put u život*, Il deo, Zlatna knjiga, Leskovac, 2009. p. 149.

35 In his book *Orthodox Psychotherapy (Pravoslavna psihoterapija)* Metropolitan bishop Jerotej Vlahos emphasizes the importance of religion for the development of moral virtues stressing the importance of fasting for spiritual and physical health of people. He argues that fasting, from psychological point of view, is especially important for strengthening of one's will, calmness and as a technique of imposing spiritual self-discipline.

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 importance³⁷. 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 Solzhenitsyn, 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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36 S.R. Hantington, *Vojnik i država*, FNP i Diplomatska akademija, Beograd, 2004, 9 – 22, 60 – 87.

37 "...It would be inappropriate not to be pleased with spiritual health or be sad because of the change of diet. ...Just like that, fasting ...that really deserves to be called [cure], when enters the soul, paralyses the sin that is hiding deep in it... you can keep overeating throughout your life, thus destroying your body with the burden of what you eat. I know very well that doctors do not advise patients to have a varied diet, but to avoid food and starve...What is easier for the bowls: to spend a night after a moderate dish or to lie burdened with an abundance of food...Would you say that it is easier for helmsmen to save a loaded ship ... than a well-equipped but light ship? An overloaded ship will be flooded even by small waves...So human bodies, burdened with persistent overeating, can easily be overcome by diseases. But if one has simple and light dishes, the evil brought by diseases can be avoided like disasters can sometimes be avoided, while resisting already present symptoms like wind gusts...The force that constitutes life easily processes what is moderate and modest. ...However, failing to digest expensive and diverse dishes completely, it turns them into various diseases..." St. Vasilije the Great: The First Sermon on Fasting