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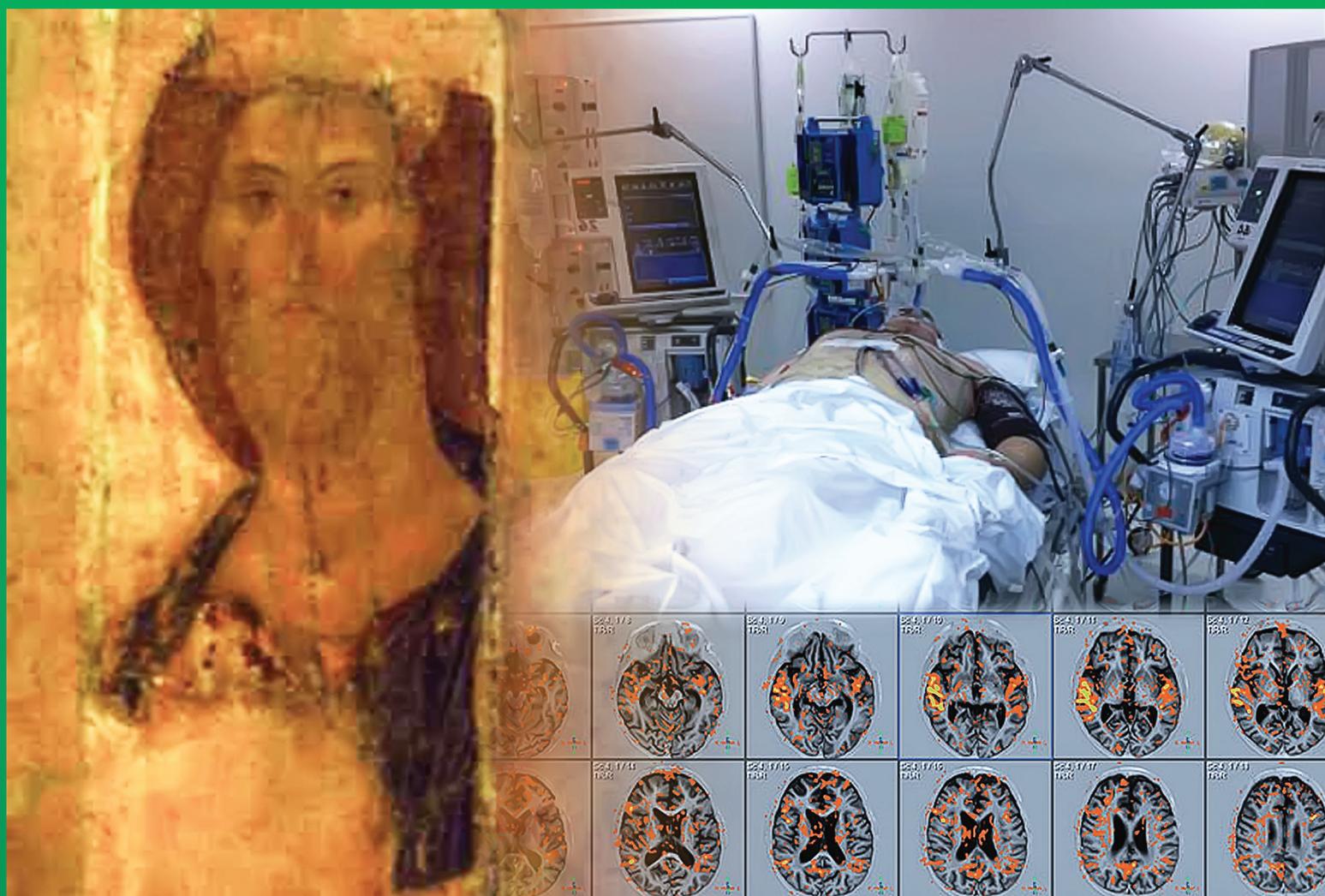


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ЦЕРКОВЬ И МЕДИЦИНА

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ЦЕРКОВЬ И МЕДИЦИНА

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SPIRITUAL HELP TO THE PATIENTS IN COMA

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Spiritual help to the patients in coma is covered by the ecclesiastical document “The Basis of the Social Concept” adopted in 2000 at the Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church. All modern ecclesiastical documents are based on the patristic doctrine having been worked out for the last 2000 years. Before speaking of the help to a patient in coma we need to realize the structure of a human being. Which part of him do we help? Do we help to his brain, or his soul, or his heart, or the whole man? To understand it better we should refer to the Orthodox theology.

The Orthodox theology states that the human nature is comprised of several parts. There are two groups of Holy Fathers, one of them is dichotomists, stating that the human being consists of the soul and the body, the other group are thrichotomists, they declare the three-partial human structure: the body, the soul, and the spirit.

Dichotomists said that the human body is made of “earth” and the soul is created by the spirit, the vital force controlling the body and endowed with reason, immortality, and free will, and called to theosis. (*translator: In the Eastern Orthodoxy deification (theosis) is a transformative process whose goal is likeness to or*

union with the God). They don’t separate the soul and the spirit.

Thrichotomists speak about the body as a soul instrument for communication with the outer world. They consider the soul to have lower spiritual nature. The soul indwells in the body, possesses it and uses it as a tool and an instrument. The soul-based life aims the satisfaction of mind, feelings and will. The soul wants to acquire knowledge and experience different feelings. The spirit is the highest part of the soul. Though the thrichotomistic approach emphasizes the third part of the human being — the spirit, it is considered to be a part of the soul (it means the dichotomists and thrichotomists have no contradiction). This main part of the soul is capable to the perception of the God.

Dichotomy

Body	Soul
Made by the God of “earth” (Gen. 2:7)	The vital force controlling the body and endowed with reason, immortality, and free will, and called to theosis

Thrichotomy

Body	Soul	Spirit
The instrument of the soul for communication with the outer world	Lower spiritual nature. The soul indwells in the body, possesses it and uses it as a tool and an instrument	The spirit is the highest part of the soul capable to the perception of the God
Needs: self-protection, reproduction	The soul-based life aims the satisfaction of mind, feelings and will. The soul wants to acquire knowledge and experience different feelings	Three aspects: conscience, a thirst for God, fear of God. As a power proceeded from God, knows God, seek God, and finds peace in God only

One of the Holy Fathers, classical trichotomists of the modern time, is a founder of purulent surgery, Doctor of Medicine, Professor, a recipient of the Stalin prize, Archbishop Luka (Voyno-Yasenetsky). Along with his works on purulent surgery, he wrote his famous spiritual work under the title "Spirit, Soul and Body" where he studies the interaction of these three parts in the human nature.

After the fall of man the broken integrity and hierarchy of the human nature led to the following changes. *The body* began to dominate over the soul and became amenable to diseases and death. *The soul* qualities were distorted and it was divided into 3 parts — mind, will, and feelings. Furthermore, the mind separated from the heart became heartless, and the heart became reasonless. The changes of *spiritual* nature led to the cut-off of the man from experiencing the God and the spiritual world. Nowadays in the minds of lots of people the spiritual life is associated with the life of a heart (some kind of man's inner life) and substituted by it.

What is the idea of the spiritual help to the patients in coma from the point of view of the spirit-soul-body conception? Ultimately, this spiritual help is rendered mainly not to the man's body but to his soul. All the main church Sacraments are addressed exactly to it. There is one important circumstance for church's Sacraments performance — the person should be in clear consciousness. If a baby is baptized then his close adults should be in consciousness. The Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick, or Holy Unction can be performed for the ill people but they are should be clearly conscious as well. There is one exception for the people who had wanted to participate in the Holy Unction before he/she fell unconscious. In other cases there is a restriction to perform church Sacraments for unconscious people.

For the patient in the condition of extreme physical exhaustion and loginess, and unable to communicate, the spiritual help as participation in the Sacraments is limited but also possible. If the person can show some reaction, there is so called voiceless Confession when the person can give answers to the priest's questions ("Have you committed sin?" "Do you want to confess?") by moving the hand, or blinking, or wriggling his toes. Through these "yes/no"

answers" he/she is confessing the sins the priest is mentioning.

The state of deep coma doesn't allow the priest to perform these Sacraments and deprives the opportunity to rehabilitate the person's soul, brain, and neural activity through the organs of sense. At this stage the spiritual help lays in prayer support. "The Basis of the Social Concept" adopted by the Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church states that death is a dissociation of the soul from the body. We have heard a lot of questions from resuscitators such as: where is the soul during the reanimation, or when the person is unconscious, in coma, under artificial ventilation of the lungs or being operated?

From the point of view of the Orthodox theology it is absolutely clear that the soul is inseparable with the body when the person is alive. According to the common idea the soul leaves the body after man's death. The Orthodox Church states the opposite: the death is the process of separation of the soul and the body. First clinical then biological death comes when the soul has left the body. Thus, it is possible to state that the person is still alive until the soul is inseparable with the body and continues to support vital functions.

In this case, the Orthodox Church says that "artificial prolongation of body's life when only separate organs are functioning cannot be considered as a necessary or unexceptionally preferable task of medicine. The procrastination of the dying hour can prolong agony of the patient and deprives him of his right to the peaceful and blameless death which the Orthodox Christians ask for in their prayers to the God during the service. When active therapy is impossible, then it can be placed with palliative support and pastoral care. It can provide the authentic and humanistic end of life warmed with care and mercy" [1].

The spiritual help to the patients, even if they unconscious, in the resuscitation unit can be provided by the priest through anointing a patient, aspersing him with holy water, and reading some special prayers. There is a special prayer for health and recovery. If the person is in deep coma or has been under artificial ventilation of the lungs for a long time, then a special set of prayers is read for the person who is suffering a lot and cannot die. After such prayers the God shows His will: either the patient's recovery comes

very quickly or the soul leaves the body and goes aloft.

Besides, if there is an absolutely clear unfavorable prognosis the priest can read a prayer for separation of soul and body. It strongly influences the soul, but not through the sense organs. It influences the human heart.

Speaking about patients in coma we cannot escape the subject of organ transplantation. This issue raises the problem of the correct ascertaining of death. Earlier the criterion was the irreversible cardiac and respiratory arrest. However, with the development of resuscitation technologies these vital important body functions can be artificially prolonged for a long period. In this case the dying hour depends on doctors and such situation imposes quite new responsibilities on modern medicine.

There are well-known examples of the recovery from coma. The brain death can be stated only for the patients who have clearly irreversible changes as a result of penetrating injury of head and brain (heavy traumatic brain injury, massive intracerebral hemorrhage, and similar).

There is a common practice to extract organs from people died a short while ago. In this case, there should be no unclarity in the death ascertaining. It is impossible to shorten the life of one individual, including the refusal from life-supporting operations, for the extension of the life of other patient.

"The Basis of the Social Concept "
of the Russian Orthodox Church, 2000

We should be afraid of making a mistake in doubtful situations. Thus, we know the cases of Alice Lowson, Martin Pistorius, Rom Houben, Sam Schmid, Terry Wallace who had been in coma for a long time and then recovered. There had been documents already signed for the organ extraction of some of them, when they showed the signs of consciousness.

The church is very careful with ascertaining of brain death and appeals to health professionals to pay maximum attention and care to such patients. The speech is not about brain stimulation, but about spiritual life, about the influence on the spiritual center of a person, his spiritual heart. When we speak

about resuscitation we mean not a recovery of consciousness (in this case, it can be called "recerebration"), we really speak about ensoulment, when the soul is able to show itself through the recovered neural activity and consciousness.

We would like to remind about some artifacts. The people in coma can experience different phenomena. They can selectively hear the voice of one of the relatives or some sounds or music. We experienced such a phenomenon when a person heard the Holy Writ and church music and nothing more. There are facts when the person in coma can recover consciousness while the priest is attempting to perform Sacraments.

The patient was in coma for 12 days without any changes. The priest was invited by one of her relatives to read the prayer for separation of the soul and body. When he came into the ward with consecrated bread and wine, the patient recovered consciousness. She confessed, received the Holy Eucharist, and then she fell in coma again. After the several days she died.

The other case just happened recently. After the priest prayers, a dying patient recovered consciousness, drank tea with her relatives and discussed the last issues, gave her last blessings and fell unconscious. Several hours later she died.

It means that spiritual influence is an influence on an individual in a holistic way. It is not brain stimulation, so to speak, it is stimulation of soul. Thanks to the works of Steven Laureys and his experience in the field of neuroimaging it is becoming obvious that we can get a contact with unconscious patients. It proves that such patients recognize themselves as individuals in such an isolated condition. It is an extremely important result of this investigation. This scientific breakthrough gives a chance to contact with such patients. As for the church people they can overcome certain boundaries and receive spiritual help [3].

The boundary between conscious and unconscious persons is moving aside and it gives an opportunity to the priest to communicate with such patients and afford spiritual balm. The works of S. Laureys prove that paying attention and giving love to the patients in coma: reading,

speaking with the patients, playing some music can extremely support the soul of such patients.

Besides, it gives a chance for voiceless Confession; we may call it “double supervoiceless Confession”. The Confession will open new perspectives for believers. The man prior to the Confession has a chance to open two doors: one is to the Heaven; the other is to the opposite place. The realization of his sins, forgiving and reconciliation with his relatives can essentially influence which of the doors an individual will open.

Speaking about the rehabilitation units we should stress that it is not only medical support what is important but emotional support of the relatives and spiritual support of the priests — Church prayers and Sacrament.

The Nobel Prize winner I. Pavlov and I. Sechenov appealed to the higher nervous activity. However, the higher nervous activity is an iceberg top. It is a part of an extensive life of a human soul. This soul life can be different,

having the perfect brain activity the person can be absolutely asocial and morally deformed.

It is so important to use not only medicated treatment and hearty support of the relatives in the rehabilitation unit, but also to provide the spiritual influence on the holistic composition of a man — his spirit, soul, and body.

To resume in conclusion:

1) every patient in coma should be considered potentially contact with an opportunity to communicate through special medical equipment (it means we should not divide patients into promising and unpromising, contact and noncontact);

2) every patient in coma has a right to medical, emotional, and spiritual support, that is being isolated he needs support and love;

3) from the point of view of the theology, as for the person in vegetative state, it is not only his brain activity that should be influenced but also his holistic composition: his body, soul, and spirit.