

# *THE TWO HANDS*

or

Hold the Cod Liver Oil, Please

by Metropolitan Ephraim of Boston

Suppose you knew of a doctor who prescribed only one medicine for all of the diseases known to mankind, would you go to such a doctor?

Suppose you suffered from chronic hiccups, or were cross-eyed, or had a big pimple on the end of your nose, or a malignant growth of fungus on your toenail, or you broke out in hives every time you ate chickpeas, or had caught the Aegean ague, or had agoraphobia, or "brain fever" (this mysterious malady keeps popping up in Dostoyevsky's novels), or started sneezing every time you came near your wife — and, no matter what you were suffering from, your doctor would always prescribe a big spoonful of cod liver oil to be taken once a day, would you continue to go to him?

Probably not, even if you liked cod liver oil.

A good, well-trained physician knows what is appropriate for every malady. Sometimes a couple of aspirins will do, and sometimes only brain surgery will solve the problem.

A doctor who throws all the tried and true rules of medicine out the window is also to be avoided. He is just as dangerous as the one who prescribes only cod liver oil for everything.

The science of spiritual healing is the same. Whether the disease be the virus of ambition, or lust for power, or just plain lust, or arrogance, or gluttony, or despondency, or the cancer of heresy or unbelief, or judging others, or laziness, or vindictiveness, or crankiness, or dishonesty, or selfishness, or whatever — the appropriate remedy has to be applied in the right doses by the good spiritual physician.

That's exactly what the 102<sup>nd</sup> Canon of the Quinisext (Fifth-Sixth) Ecumenical Council (A. D. 692) says:

It behooves those who have received from God the power to loose and bind, to consider the quality of the sin and the readiness of the sinner for conversion, and to apply medicine suitable for the disease, lest if he is injudicious in each of these respects he should fail in regard to the healing of the sick man. For the disease of sin is not simple, but various and multiform, and it germinates many mischievous offshoots, from which much evil is diffused, and it proceeds further until it is checked by the power of the physician. Wherefore he who professes the science of spiritual medicine ought first of all to consider the disposition of him who has sinned, and to see whether he tends to health or (on the contrary) provokes to himself disease by his own behaviour, and to look how he can care for his manner of life during the interval. And if he does not resist the physician, and if the ulcer of the soul is increased by the application of the imposed medicaments, then let him mete out mercy to him according as he is worthy of it. For the whole account is between God and him to whom the pastoral rule has been delivered, to lead back the wandering sheep and to cure that which is

wounded by the serpent ; and that he may neither cast them down into the precipices of despair, nor loosen the bridle towards dissolution or contempt of life ; but in some way or other, either by means of sternness and astringency, or by greater softness and mild medicines, to resist this sickness and exert himself for the healing of the ulcer, now examining the fruits of his repentance and wisely managing the man who is called to higher illumination. For we ought to know two things, to wit, the things which belong to strictness and those which belong to custom, and to follow the traditional form in the case of those who are not fitted for the highest things, as holy Basil [the Great] teaches us.

This is *the* purpose and aim of the holy canons: our spiritual healing. As we have written elsewhere about this subject, originally, in Greek, a *kanón* was a rule, a measuring stick, a plumb-line that bricklayers used to determine if the wall they were building were straight. It is a guide-line. So, if a brick is a *little* off, it will not necessarily throw the wall down. In making these rules for the Church, the Holy Fathers did not use the word *nómos*, which means "law," which implies more rigidity. Since we are dealing with human beings, and not bricks, we need some flexibility. As Saint Nicodemus of the Holy Mountain says, this is why the Church uses "two hands" in governing her affairs: strictness and *economia* — for the good and proper administration of the Household of God. In a sense, the collection of the holy canons is like a tool box. The tools are *all* needed, but not in the same place and at the same time. So, you don't throw the tools away, but you use them appropriately. Neither are they all of equal value. Nonetheless, *all are needed* at one point or another.

When the spiritual doctor uses *economia* all the time, his flock will grow lax and, eventually, lapse. If he uses strictness all the time, his flock will despair and, eventually, lapse. We have seen this time and again. Therefore, how heedful the spiritual physician must be in discerning what medications he needs at the appropriate time.

The patients, too, must be intelligent. They, too, must understand that the medicine that works for them might not work for their fellow parishioners. They must not ask questions like: "Why did the spiritual physician give that patient a pat on the back, whereas he made me take a spoonful of cod liver oil?" Or, "How come he only has to take an aspirin, and I have to have brain surgery, for what —to me — looks like the same illness?" Does everyone have the same medical history? When you are in the doctor's office, do you go poking around, asking the other patients what kind of medicine the doctor is giving *them*? No, of course not, because it's none of your business.

It's exactly the same with spiritual therapy. You may need a head transplant, while the other needs only a foot rub.

In either case, don't tie the doctor's hands. He needs both of them.