

## ***Cosmetic Surgery***

Is it Permissible from the Orthodox Perspective?

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Ethical Issues

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## Introduction

With the emergence of the latest television fad, reality shows such as *Extreme Makeover* and *The Swan* which document the personal experiences of plastic surgery patients, the surgical community has seen a noticeable increase in interest for elective cosmetic procedures. In these TV programs patients are followed from initial consultation to final product to aftermath, depicting the trauma of the procedures together with the end result. In all of the shows, of course, the final results are stunning and the families are ecstatic, so the pain endured during the process is forgotten in light of the praise offered by each patient and their loved ones in post-surgery interviews. Clearly these programs glorify plastic surgery as a means by which to improve one's appearance, and usually suggest that each patient's exterior enhancement(s) will benefit his or her self-esteem and relationships, and magically make the person happy and popular. In their eagerness to exalt cosmetic surgery, however, the shows fail to address whether plastic surgery is ethical, either Christian or otherwise. Obviously, with the cosmetic surgery trend growing each year, the Christian faithful of this country will need pastoral guidance in deciding which procedures, if any, to pursue. Let us examine this issue in greater detail from an Orthodox perspective.

## Background

Before we can fully address the issue at hand, we should review some basic Orthodox principles with regard to God and man. As Fr. John Breck explains in his book, *The Sacred Gift of Life*, which addresses various modern bioethical issues:

The human person is the most sublime expression of God's creation activity. Adam and Eve, man and woman, are created according to the "image and likeness of God" (Gen 1:26). God is both the origin and the destiny of created human life. His "image" is realized in human beings not so much through particular attributes or capacities (love, reason, etc.) as through the distinctive *personal* quality that sets humans apart from and above every other corporeal being.<sup>1</sup>

We see, therefore, that the Orthodox Church sees each and every person, each human life, as sacred, since it was made in the image of God. Since God is the destiny of every person, not one human can be treated as lesser than another, despite whatever peculiarities, whatever traits, each might exhibit. As Fr. John states, individual attributes do not detract from from the image of God

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<sup>1</sup>John Breck, *The Sacred Gift of Life: Orthodox Christianity and Bioethics* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2000), p. 28.

which is inherent in every human being. Therefore, an amputee, a quadriplegic, or a severely mentally ill person cannot be considered less human than someone who is fully healthy, because, again, everyone was created in God's image. In this sense, any desire to modify one's characteristics actually detracts from his personhood, since, as Fr. John put it, it is precisely his "distinctive *personal* quality that sets [a human being] apart from and above every other corporeal being."

However, the Church also recognizes that because of sin the human condition has been weakened and is susceptible to death and corruption. As the Holy Synod of Bishops of the Orthodox Church in America affirms in its document *On Marriage, Family, Sexuality, and the Sanctity of Life*, issued during the Tenth All-American Council held in Miami, Florida, in July, 1992:

From the very beginning of human life on earth the rebellion of men and women against God has resulted in sickness, suffering and death. This is the meaning of the story of Adam and Eve, and their children and descendants, found in the first chapters of the Bible (Genesis 1-11).

The whole of creation- all the plants and animals, fish and birds, rocks and planets- is "groaning in travail" as it "waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God;" for in the final coming of Christ all of creation "will be set free from the bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God" (Romans 8:18-21).<sup>2</sup>

Therefore, the condition of man is not precisely as God created him. Man, and all of creation, is subject to decay. For this reason, the Holy Synod also declares:

Convinced of these God-revealed truths we offer the following affirmations and admonitions for the guidance of the faithful:

All efforts to heal physical and spiritual sickness, to alleviate physical and spiritual suffering, and to prevent physical and spiritual death are to be supported and defended.<sup>3</sup>

Likewise, the Russian Orthodox Church in its renowned document, *Basic Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church*, published at its Jubilee Bishops' Council in August, 2000, elaborates:

The Orthodox Church has always treated the medical work with high respect as it is based on the service of love aimed to prevent and relieve people's suffering. The recovery of the human nature distorted by illness appears as the fulfillment of God's design for man. 'May the very God of peace sanctify you wholly and may your whole spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless unto the

<sup>2</sup> Holy Synod of the Orthodox Church in America, "Sickness, Suffering, and Death" *Synodal Affirmations on Marriage, Family, Sexuality, and the Sanctity of Life* (Syosset, NY: Orthodox Church in America, 1992).

<<http://www.oca.org/pages/ocaadmin/documents/All-American-Council/10-Miami-1992/Synodal-Affirmations.html>>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

coming of our Lord Jesus Christ' (1 Thes. 5:23).<sup>4</sup>

However, when seeking healing, one must be aware of the role that the remedying should play:

The body, free from slavery to sinful passions and illnesses as their consequences, should serve the soul, while the spiritual powers and abilities, transformed by the grace of the Holy Spirit, should aspire for the ultimate goal and calling of man which is deification. Every authentic healing is called to be part of this miracle of healing accomplished in the Church of Christ.<sup>5</sup>

In greater detail:

Jesus Christ has come to save the world. He has come to free human beings from the tyranny of sickness, suffering and death through the forgiveness and expiation of their sins by his own sinless suffering and death.

Jesus Christ shows us that human suffering has redeeming and sanctifying significance. It can be the means of finding God in the fallen world, the means of purification from carnal passions, the means of enlightenment and communion with God for everlasting life.

The apostle Paul tells us that "the sufferings of the present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us" (Romans 8:18). He says that our earthly sufferings are but the "slight momentary affliction" which "is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison" (2 Corinthians 4:17).<sup>6</sup>

Therefore, although the Church recognizes that man through sin is susceptible to sickness and death, and although She blesses and urges Her faithful to seek medical treatment for physical and mental ailments, the Orthodox Church also calls upon Christians to seek healing of body *and* soul. St. Paul tells us, "your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own." From the Orthodox perspective body and soul are not separate entities, but coexist by nature; their forceful separation at death is not by nature, but a consequence of sin. Therefore, the Holy Synod affirms:

Those who suffer, and those related to the suffering, are to be helped to find God in their affliction, and so to acquire the divine grace and power to transform their pain into a means of purification from evil, illumination from darkness and eternal salvation in the age to come.<sup>7</sup>

Medical treatment of any kind should, thus, resemble the awesome and life-creating Mysteries, which are given to us "for the good and sanctification of our souls and bodies."<sup>8</sup> Just as we pray to

<sup>4</sup> Jubilee Bishops' Council of the Russian Orthodox Church, "Personal and National Health" *Basic Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church* (Moscow: DECR Communication Service, 2000). <[http://www.mospat.ru/text/e\\_conception](http://www.mospat.ru/text/e_conception)>

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Holy Synod, "Sickness, Suffering, and Death."

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

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God after Communion to “let them be for the healing of soul and body,” so too must we seek healing of our entire being, not just for our bodies, in any surgical procedures and treatments we pursue.

### **The Issue of Cosmetic Surgery**

At present there are no official declarations by the Orthodox Church with regard to a policy on cosmetic surgery. Nevertheless, it is not difficult to pinpoint a policy which could be considered credible. For now the most definitive response can be found in an online question and answer forum on the Orthodox Church in America website, in which the OCA Director of Communications, Fr. John Matusiak, answers e-mail questions posed by inquirers and faithful alike. Fr. John responds to an inquiry about cosmetic surgery:

It is only my opinion, but it would seem that unless there is some serious and valid reason -- and I am not sure that wishing to change one's appearance simply for its own sake is a valid reason or that such a reason is not prompted by pride or an undue concern for how we look rather than who we are -- one should tamper with that with which one has been blessed by God. It is one thing, for example, to have reconstruction in order to make it possible to breathe better; it is another thing to undergo such procedures simply for the sake of "cosmetics" or to gain more "self esteem," something with which our culture is obsessed and yet which the Church would view as taking our focus off of God and placing undue attention on the self.<sup>9</sup>

Although Fr. John offers the disclaimer that this response is only his own opinion, nonetheless his answer seems very Orthodox, both theologically and pastorally. Certainly, his answer adheres to the definitions set forth above, in that it allows for medical treatment of physical impairment, but warns against procedures that would not contribute to health of body *and* soul. Fr. John's answer is affirmed by *An Outline of Orthodox Beliefs and Practices* found on the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Canada's website:

Orthodoxy holds the Biblical view that the body is the temple of the Holy Spirit. As such, it must be treated with honour and dignity. [This] means keeping it as intact and unaltered as possible. The only type of surgical opening or extraction that is acceptable is that which is for therapeutic or preventive purposes, but not for reasons of selfishness or vanity.<sup>10</sup>

Some Orthodox sources, however, are more direct. Fr. Andrew Phillips, pastor of Ss. Felix & Edmund Orthodox Church in Felixstowe, England, links cosmetic surgery with a decline in the ascetical life in the Church:

<sup>9</sup> <[http://www.oca.org/pages/orth\\_chri/q-and-a\\_old/cosmetic-surgery.html](http://www.oca.org/pages/orth_chri/q-and-a_old/cosmetic-surgery.html)>

<sup>10</sup> <<http://www.uocc.ca/practices-b.html>>

Prayer has been replaced by non-Christian meditation. Fasting has been replaced by a slimming and dieting industry with fads which aim to increase physical beauty. Many of these fads have in reality actually led to self-mutilation, for instance, through cosmetic surgery and death through anorexia. Almsgiving and acts of mercy have been replaced by tax-free gifts to 'the charity industry', where one can foster one's 'image' and promote public relations.<sup>11</sup>

As a priest of the conservative Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia, it is not surprising that Fr. Andrew uses such direct language. Nevertheless, in the case of plastic surgery for the sake of vanity, his argument does adhere to Orthodox doctrine. Altering one's God-given body for non-medical reasons does not fit the ideals of Orthodox asceticism. Rather, the pride that might come with greater "self-confidence," or increased sexual tension as one becomes more noticed could be very destructive to one's soul. Thus, Fr. Andrew's concern is warranted, provided treatment of physical ailments by such procedures are not outrightly condemned.

## Conclusion

Fr. John Breck, in an article presented at the 1995 Orthodox Education Day at St. Vladimir's Seminary, states:

Health and wholeness have ultimate meaning only within the perspective of God's eternal purpose, the divine economy to be fulfilled at "the second and glorious coming" of Jesus Christ. Medical care, therefore, should serve not only the proximate goal of restoring or improving bodily health; it should strive to provide optimal conditions for the patient's spiritual growth at every stage in the life cycle. This means curing disease; but it also means, particularly in terminal cases, easing pain and distress by any appropriate means in order to allow the patient, through prayer, confession and communion, to surrender him/herself into the hands of God.<sup>12</sup>

For Orthodox Christians, then, the question of cosmetic surgery basically comes down to need versus desire. If one *requires* cosmetic surgery for health reasons, to function normally as God created him or her, then certainly such treatment would be permissible. However, in the case of simple desire to change one's appearance, one must consider how a cosmetic procedure would affect one's body *and* soul. One should be very cautious in the latter case, to say the least. Ultimately, however, in the nature of Orthodox spiritual tradition, such decisions should certainly not be made alone, but with much prayer and consultation with one's spiritual father or pastor.

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<sup>11</sup> Fr. Andrew Phillips, "The Holy Spirit Lost: Brave New Religion." <<http://www.orthodoxengland.btinternet.co.uk/bravenr.htm>>

<sup>12</sup> Fr. John Breck, "Medical Ethics: A Theological Discipline." <<http://www.svots.edu/Events/Orthodox-Education-Day/Articles/1995-Fr-John-Breck.html>>