X Oration

Given on 6th November 1708

Medicine that can be learned from the Sacred Scriptures

In our society today, there is almost nobody who, when they hear a friend or somebody else complain of one kind of ailment or another, does not have a remedy at hand to suggest, whether immediately at hand, or easy to prepare, to cure him of the indisposition afflicting him as soon as possible. Likewise, there is almost no writer who does not like adding elements of medicine in his own works – either to add weight to the subject in question, as embellishment or for aesthetical reasons. If we leaf through the books of philosophy and natural history that have been passed on down to us, or literature on ethics or politics, Greek or Latin poetry, we are sure to find countless precepts of the medicine of the ancients, which, scattered and in metaphors, stand out and make a profounder mark on the readers' soul than when they appear in their rightful field and arranged systematically.

Although they did not cultivate the field of medicine known as clinical, we can see from their works that ancient philosophers and writers of natural history still strived to penetrate the remotest recesses and mysteries of the field. What is more, some of them even went as far as to dirty their own hands with blood, dissecting the corpses of animals, as is said of Democritus. Homer, the bestower of all kinds of doctrine, added many elements of pharmacology and surgery to his Iliad, describing how the camp physicians Podalirius and Macaone treated their men and even the gods themselves, when they sided with one side because of love; this is known to any learned person; as is the fact that when describing Ulysses' various pilgrimages, Homer would cite the amazing virtues of dif-
different plants, and no matter how hard the most illustrious botanists have tried, it is still not possible to establish which plants Homer was actually talking about. The Latin poets did the very same, often descending from the two peaks of Mount Parnassus to drink at the very sources of medicine, as is well-known not only to scholars, but also to the most famous physicians, who never consider it beneath them to quote such a poet as an authority, whether at university, when giving advice, or in their publications, and by doing so believe they are adding more support and honour to their reasoning. If only it had been thanks to the medical interpretation of a qualified specialist that everything the ancient poets had written about medicine had been returned to its true, original splendour, which, because of scholars' ignorance in the medical field was not valued as it should have been. As far as I know, the only person to do so was Martial. Furthermore, just how much can scholars of the medical field learn from the Holy Bible, which is not to be regarded with suspicion, as are the books of pagans, but is reliable and sincere, to any one who pays attention and takes delight in such reading! For sure, the Sacred Scriptures are the foundations of faith and religion and this is what makes them of such use, but they are also works of such excellence and fertility because they contain a sort of invigorating seed, thanks to which there is not one person who reads them and does not become more learned in their own field. Illustrious listeners, in today's orations I would therefore like to illustrate the sacred medicine in the Old and New Testament, commenting, or rather limiting myself to just a few, carefully chosen passages from the Sacred Scriptures, since it is impossible to treat such a vast subject with the attention it deserves in just one discourse.

I believe the Sacred Scriptures are ample testimony that medicine is a great gift God has bestowed on us mortals, so that, as far as possible, we can preserve our good health or treat it when it suffers. "The Almighty hath created medicines out of the earth, and no wise man shall abstain", as the wisest man of all once said, Solomon, or whoever it is we have to thank for this saying. And not even those who hate medicine (and they are numerous whatever the year) would pretend this saying is referring to spiritual, not natural medicine. Indeed, it is clear from the sacred texts that God created medicine from the earth, or rather, he attributed herbs, plants, minerals and other things with medical qualities that enable
them to dispel disease. We should therefore believe the following: starting with our forefather, whom the divine Architect bestowed with thorough, innate knowledge, one that was not derived from studies, true remedies suitable for each and every illness and their correct use have been passed down like vine shoots from a single plant. Thus, medicine lasted for centuries, passed down from generation to generation in all its primitive simplicity, as is only logical, since it was restricted to herbal remedies in particular. Then, many centuries later, thanks to the discovery of writing, it was entrusted to parchment and papyrus and was transformed into a profession to earn money, as it is today and always will be, because the scent of profit is so attractive, as the poet said, no matter where it comes from. It can be said that thanks to the pagans, and to Hippocrates in particular (he is said to have learned which remedies cure which illness just from looking at the paintings in the temple of Asclepius in Epidaurus and after a fire broke out in the temple he published his comments), it can be said, I was saying, that thanks to the fathers of medicine we have highly elegant theories and precepts on how medicine should be practised within the limits of human skills. However, those who devote a little effort to a detailed study of the sacred scripts will discover outstanding teachings, true oracles that can make a physician both learned and devout.

To go in order, respecting the prescriptive and scholastic division of the various branches of the medical field, from the books of Genesis we have a wide physiology of the principles, structure and faculties of the human body. “And the Lord God formed of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being”. Since man was made from the dust of the earth, it is clear that he is the result of the fusion of the elements, or rather, of earth, water and particles of air and fire, endowed with an excellent temperament regarding not only balance but also weight since God created every thing “by number, weight and measure”.

And it is inconceivable that the first man was a simulacrum consolidated in that fashion, in the way a common sculptor creates a statue from a simple mass of clay, only worrying about the visible exterior; indeed, first of all, the Divine Architect created the main organs in the suitable material (as required by the balance of the parts and functions), before going on to arrange them in their place – heart, brain, sense organs, and then, once his work was complete,
he covered it all with skin, as a general protective covering: When his body rotted and decayed, Job exclaimed: “Your hands have fashioned me and made me together round about, you dressed me with skin and flesh”. Similarly, when he is admiring skill of the Divine Creator in the making of his body, the King Prophet said: “I believe in you, O Lord, because your hands fashioned me so exquisitely”.

In confirmation of the absolute perfection of the work the Divine Artist was attaining, is the fact that first he created the Universe as an archetype he could adapt Man to, following a method that is opposite to that of architects who, when they want to create something big, such as a basilica, a theatre, or a royal palace, first they create a reduced-scale model, so they have it before their eyes and in their minds while completing the project. Furthermore, it is characteristic of the Divine Artifice that he enclosed the big in the small, and the tiny bodies of the insects merit more admiration than the huge bodies of whales. The human body is therefore something that is truly divine; just like an automatic device, “beautiful things are hidden inside”, which, when they become visible, silently reveal the infinite knowledge of their Creator. On the other hand, God decided to place the treasure of an immortal animal in such a sculptural creation, but one of the highest constructive elegance, blowing a “particle of Divine Air” into the face of the first man. Philon, known as the Plato of the Jews, correctly deduced that God placed the soul in the head, where the principal sense organs are, together with the origin of the nerves and the spinal cord. It is this Ecclesiastes is referring to metaphorically with the elegant expression: the silver cord. Indeed, what else could the nerves originating in the brain be, if not silver threads leading to various parts of the body? And it is to these that we owe such pleasant harmony that results from countless amazing functions.

Furthermore, to nourish the flame of life and guarantee each part is nourished, the Divine Creator bestowed man with invigorating nectar that is the blood, which would flow continuously through his vessels, through his whole body. And the great dignity of this liquid can be seen in the renowned commandment of the Old Law that forbade the Jews to use animal blood in their food. From this we can deduce that those who refused to believe blood should be included in the list of the parts of the body were far from the truth; indeed, blood is a fundamental part of the body and the main tool of the soul.
and it is both easy and fearful to lose such a treasure. In truth, as far as the continuous motion of blood that physicians always speak of is concerned, and if it continues, so does life, while if it is interrupted, so is life in an instant, it is possible to discern assumptions in the Holy scriptures, and in the Ecclesiastes in particular, that outline the circulation of blood and these are certainly not to be scorned. “Remember him—before the silver cord is severed, or the golden bowl is broken; before the pitcher is shattered at the spring, or the wheel broken at the well, and the dust returns to the ground it came from, and the spirit returns to God who gave it”. Since the structure of the human body is thanks to the skill of Divine knowledge alone, and this does not only apply to the creation of the universe, when man was made from the dust of the earth for the very first time, but also to the continuous, successive reproduction of mankind, which always has the support of the Divine Artifice. And Nature, which physicians and philosophers have made into their idol and is admired even more so when they are unable to understand something, has nothing to do with it. It is just a word, one that is pure and simple, and there is no word that is more offensive to God. In the Sacred Scriptures there is no Hebrew term that can be understood as “nature” since everything is the work of God alone, unless nature is to be understood as God himself. Seneca expressed himself well on this subject: “Call it Nature, [...] these are names of the one and selfsame God”.

In truth, in the Holy Scriptures and in the Ecclesiastes in particular there are frequent salutary lessons to help preserve good health—which is the most pleasant fruit of two elements coming together, a good initial constitution and a healthy lifestyle—lessons that are comparable to those we can read in Hippocrates, Galen, Celsus and other medical writers: “Eating abundantly hides disease and it leads to colic; those who are frugal live longer. Be hasty in everything you do and no illness will befall you”. This corresponds to something Hippocrates wrote: “Looking after one’s health is neither a surfeit of food, nor fatigue without rest”. According to Hippocrates himself, good health therefore depends on a rational diet and moderate physical activity without excesses of either kind. If a regular diet and physical exercise have opposite effects, that of satiating and that of losing weight, a rational alternation of the two would result in a perfect balance and be the basis and foundation of good health. On the other hand, in our society, unless one wishes to
isolate oneself from public life and choose a more rustic existence, it is not always possible to follow such a perfectly balanced lifestyle and eat regularly, in a linear fashion as it were, and avoid that after lengthy fasting, one exceeds the limits of moderation at dinner and becomes physically indisposed. In these cases, the Ecclesiastes recommends induced vomiting as the only remedy: “And if thou hast been forced to eat, go forth, vomit, and thou shalt have rest”. Inducing vomiting to protect one’s health was a relatively common remedy for the Ancients, even more so on the occasion of lavish dinners with a variety of dishes that would continue long into the evening with excessive wining and dining – something we are familiar with today as well. In those cases when vomiting was spontaneous, fasting and rest would be recommended as a remedy to counter these excesses although, in reality, if one has eaten more than one can digest, it is more logical to choose the fastest way to expel what one has eaten and vomiting is certainly an easier and quicker way than the winding of the intestines. Thus Avicenna, exalted amongst the Arabs, would recommend vomiting two consecutive days each month, perhaps something he learned from the Egyptians who believed that all illnesses were the result of excesses of diet and would induce vomiting to empty the stomach of the ballast of undigested food every three months.

There is also a harvest that is anything other than paltry in pathological doctrine, one that is useful for the knowledge of different kinds of illnesses and the differences amongst them. It suffices to consider leprosy and scabies. I shall not dwell on the grave burden on the shoulders of priests who dealt with medicine, which was regarded as something sacred, according to the precepts of the Law; they had to assess all the diagnostic, prognostic and pathognomic symptoms to distinguish leprosy and scabies from other skin illnesses, and discover the stage and different kinds of typologies of infection from the changes in skin and hair colour; on the basis of this they then had to decide how many days the person suspected of having this contagion should be placed in isolation, or whether simple washing was sufficient to purify them, before deciding whether they were truly impure and should thus be banished from the city or camp. Indeed, anyone can consult the holy text called Law of Leprosy and see the detailed, complete study of the disease it describes. Now, however, with your permission I would like to go from the-
ory to practice, and thus to the particular treatment of the illnesses we find described in the Old Testament. It would be both irreverent and foolhardy to deny that they contain an element of mystery and divine intervention and nevertheless, they are practiced with natural medicinals that are the very ones that any good doctor would prescribe for such illnesses. Worthy of mention is certainly the remedy used by Elisha, both prophet and physician, to treat Naaman, leader of the army of the King of Syria who was suffering terribly from leprosy. After being unable to find any remedy from the palace physicians to cure that terrible contagion, he was told by a young Jewish girl who was a servant in his house, that in Samaria there was a prophet God was very fond of, who was miraculously able to cure any illness. He therefore set out to Samaria straight away, with a numerous retinue and countless gifts. He beseechingly presented himself at the prophet’s door and was told to go to the river Jordan and wash himself in its waters seven times; he would thus be cured of leprosy. When he heard this, he felt considerable indignation since he believed his name and position in Syria deserved something better than such a common cure, without even being given a glance. Indeed, he believed that the leprosy afflicting him would fall at Elisha’s feet like a garment. He thus started making preparations to return to Syria when he was persuaded by his slaves that there was no harm in trying such a simple remedy to see if there was anything divine in it. He washed himself seven times in the river Jordan and, as we can read in the Holy Bible, “and his flesh came again like unto the flesh of a little child, and he was clean”. It can certainly not be denied that there is a symbolic reference to the Sacraments of the New Law in that simple ablution, and nor can it be denied that that healing was actually the result of a miracle. Nevertheless, from a different point of view, the remedy suggested by the prophet was completely natural and one that heals cutaneous infections. Indeed, the best remedy offered by the art of medicine for such illnesses is washing with fresh water, river water in particular, since it dissolves the saline and acidic particles clinging to the skin and its fresh, pure and flowing movement removes them. If only the use of washing and bathing were more common in the case of cutaneous afflictions, and less that widespread and irksome practice of emptying of the bowels and blood-letting! Indeed, when scabies, leprosy, lichen, impetigo and other similar afflictions are illnesses of the skin alone,
the result of the pollution of its ferment, and are not abscesses and thus without any harm to the internal entrails, it is wicked to torment the bodies with such purgatives and teas when the topical application of salts and herb juices suffices. On the other hand, according to the holy text, "Namaan was strong and robust, but a leper", and from this we may deduce that the illness had not degenerated into an abscess, that is, a rejection of the humours in the body by a diseased internal viscus, which is why the ablution recommended by the prophet was the most suitable remedy for the illness. This is because when the viscera are intact, they require no treatment and because divine intervention had made the water of the river Jordan so powerful that just seven baths sufficed to eradicate this terrible illness. Thus, very often when treating scabies, which Hippocrates called an "affliction of the body rather than an illness", if physicians ignore or disregard this consideration, they are wasting time and become ill-renowned, not just amongst the common folk but also amongst scholars. The illustrious poet whose mortal remains lie in the Euganean hills, Francesco Petrarch was once afflicted by widespread, terrible scabies and after having suffered the entire winter trying the usual purgatives with the result that the itching increased rather than decreased, he questioned the physicians who were treating him; They replied he had to wait for the summer and the illness would disappear. At that point, since he felt he was being treated like anyone simply walking along the street, he exploded and, as one might expect of a poet, irritable by nature, began to contest the physicians and in a letter to a friend he wrote: "I have no trust in physicians and I expect nothing from the summer but rather from the one it is said: 'you created spring and summer'".

Particularly note-worthy is the treatment our aforementioned prophet used to bring back to life the dead, or presumed dead son of a Shunammite woman. Summoned from his hermitage to Mount Carmel by the mother's prayers, he entered the room where the young boy was lying, sent everyone out of the room including the mother and, praying to God, the source of all cures, he laid himself on top of the boy, his mouth upon his mouth, his eyes and hands on the boy's and when he felt the boy's body was gradually becoming warmer again, he got up and began darting to and fro in the room to make himself warm; then, as before, he laid himself on top of the boy. He did this more than once, when the boy sneezed seven times, opened
his eyes, and was brought back to life. There are those who believe the boy was not really dead, but afflicted by a syncope or catalepsy thus making those around him believe he was dead and they are now held in certain esteem (although there are others who believe differently). I myself am in agreement with the former; indeed, there are numerous cases in which people come back to life, even at the very moment of their funeral, something that has frequently been observed in hysterical women, and the greatest attention should be paid in such cases so they are not buried as quickly as other corpses. It is said that Vesalius, the illustrious anatomist, who was the first to teach anatomy at this University at the age of twenty-three, and paid with public money, dissected a noble matron believed dead to discover the cause of her death. However, as soon as the knife pierced her breast, she opened her eyes, and with a groan breathed her last breath. For this reason, this highly esteemed figure was accused of obtorto collo, as the saying goes, by the lady’s family, and to atone for what was believed to be impiety, he was sentenced to go on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem after which he is said to have died in misery in a hovel on the island of Zakynthos on his way home. This was a man, by God, who deserved a better fate. Thus, by no means out of turn, the prophet heated the vital spirits in the boy afflicted by syncope or catalepsy that were about to fade with his own natural heat and they returned to their normal functions. In the case of such illnesses, if the entire body has become cold the only solution lies in abundant wines, in quintessence and elixirs, and any other preparations that warm the body. What is more similar to innate heat than the vivid heat of a healthy, robust man, through the mouth and the precordium? Thus Elisha performed this prodigious healing using a natural remedy, with the favour of divine compassion.

Furthermore, this prophet was extremely adept at unexpected cases and well-educated in the natural sciences! Once, Judea had been afflicted by famine so Elisha ordered one of his slaves to prepare a large pot of soup for the prophet’s children. The slave went into the fields and, because of his inexperience, gathered some pumpkins which he put into the pot as seasoning. After it had been cooked over the fire and the prophet’s children tasted the soup, they realised it was highly bitter and began to shout: “Death is in the cooking pot!” as if they had swallowed poison. Elisha immediately came and added some flour to the soup to improve its flavour, thus
making it an agreeable dish. Now, whether it was really a pumpkin
or some other plant is unimportant; it suffices to underline the fact
that the remedy he used could never have been sufficient on its own
to eliminate such an unpleasant taste so quickly without divine inter­
vention. Nevertheless, it was a natural remedy and one that was ap­
propriate and slowly reached its objective. Indeed, flour, whether of
wheat, barley or any other kind of cereal is in its very nature able to
enshroud and neutralise the acid particles of any kind, thanks to its
thickness and viscosity. Therefore, to reduce the acid fluxion, so they
do not descend down into the respiratory apparatus and become
a threat for phthisis, as if it were a lifeline, we resort to medicines
made with starch, barley teas, and the so-called “pot (or dish) of
Saxony” by an illustrious professor from this University in the past.

In the Holy Scripts there are other rapid cures for diseases, start­
ing with natural remedies but brought to a conclusion by divine in­
tervention, for example when the prophet Isaiah saved King Heze­
kiah from extreme danger when he was at death’s door following
a terrible injury so he applied a poultice of figs to it; or when he
restored Tobias’ sight after he had become blind thanks to the bile
of a fish called calionimo (dragonet), a remedy the Archangel Raph­
heal had told Tobias’ son about. Galen also mentions this fish, and
recommends its bile to eliminate leucoma and ocular thickening.

However, let us go on to the cures – truly worthy of physicians’
admiration – practiced by Christ, our Redeemer while he was alive,
to crown sacred medicine and my oration. We often read and hear
sermons by sacred orators that Christ earned his name as the great
prophet and son of God because of his prodigious cures for ill­
nesses that held no hope, with either just a simple command of
his voice or sometimes with the use of natural remedies. Let us
choose examples of the second kind, and assess them with the
greatest veneration. Nearly anyone who knows how to read knows
that Christ restored the eyesight to a man born blind by applying a
mixture of earth and spit, and sending him to the Pool of Siloam.
Only those who treated him know what the blind-man’s eyes were
afflicted by; however, on the basis of the eyewash used it is reason­
able to assume that the affliction was one that required a cleaning
agent to remove a sort of thickening that was hindering his sight.
This is not the right place for a discussion of the capacity of human
saliva in our bodies and outside – it suffices to say that the saliva of
a healthy man with an empty stomach does not hold the last place in ocular medication. In truth, just how effective must that pur- est secretion from the salivary glands of Christ have been, whose temperament was so perfect and outstanding it has always been incomparable to any other? But then who is able to affirm the true reason he mixed earth and saliva? Since he was omniscient and, \textit{a priori}, as philosophers say, he knew exactly what properties to cure blindness would ensue in such a mixture, while our weakness does not allow us to know, unless \textit{a posteriori} and through experience, called the "only trial for mortals", which properties new compounds acquire when substances of a different nature are mixed to- gether. In truth, it can be said that the water of the pool of Siloam, in which the blind-man washed his eyes and restored his eyesight, was thermal and thus endowed with cleansing qualities. Situated on the slopes of Mount Zion, according to written documentation this source begins boiling at certain times of the day and hoards of Turks and Saracens travel there to cure their cutaneous infections and diseases of the eyes. Thus it pleased our Redeemer to work using ocular remedies, with the assistance of faith, and fulfil this pro- digious healing of the blind-man, to confirm with just one example the fact that it was God who created the medicine of the earth, and it would not be worthy of any wise man to shun it.

In almost the same fashion he restored the hearing and speech of the deaf and dumb, placing a finger in their ears, thus touching – as is logical – the part most affected, and then rubbing their tongue with a finger covered with his own saliva – as is written in the Holy Bible, "and straightway his ears were opened, and the string of his tongue was loosed". If this was a case of deafness at birth, thus lead- ing to muteness, once the defect of the ears had been removed by putting a finger in the auricular cavity, there was no reason for the successive rubbing of the mute man's tongue with a finger covered in saliva. We may therefore suspect, or rather, assert that there was not only a structural defect of the ears, but also some kind of mal- formation of the mute man's tongue, which Christ removed with his touch and salivary secretion. The curative qualities emanating from the body of Christ possessed so much energy that he could make happy whoever he approached, and even more so those He deigned to touch; thus one day he touched the leper who was cleansed straight away, he cured Peter's father-in-law who was afflicted with
a high fever by just taking his hand, and he cured many more with just a simple touch of his thaumaturgical hand.

Furthermore, this disease-dispelling quality was an innate characteristic in the humanity of Christ. Indeed, if the so-called torpedo ray fish is able to numb a fisherman's arm in just an instant, and this is natural, why on earth should the virtues Christ had to recreate the shattered tone of the body parts in a flash not be called specifically natural and exclusive of one in whom human and divine nature blended in such a miraculous relationship? I tend to believe that God did this deliberately so that our Redeemer could thus prove he was really God and really man.

At this point, we shall now remember with thanks, the story of the woman suffering from haemorrhages, to obtain lessons that lead to a manner of cures from the admirable curative interventions of Christ that are both safe and Christian. In her heart after hearing people talking, and such talk was resounding throughout Judea, she felt such faith in her heart that she was absolutely convinced that her health would be restored if, after saying goodbye to the physicians, she were to touch the gown of Christ just once, and her faith was not disappointed. She left her house and mingled with the crowd, elbowing her way through and shouting so that she was finally able to touch the Redeemer's robe and immediately she was cured, "the fountain of her blood was dried up", as is written in the Holy Bible. According to the Evangelist, she "had an issue of blood twelve years, and had suffered many things of many physicians, and had spent all that she had, and was nothing bettered, but rather grew worse". As is often the case in lengthy, contumacious illnesses, this unlucky woman had tried her luck, or rather, had subjected herself to the tortures of countless physicians but, it was all in vain and the illness grew worse day by day. Thus, spending her money on physicians and medicine every day, she soon found herself reduced to extreme poverty and was either forced to sell her possessions or pawn them. Is there anyone who does not see that this story mocks a custom of physicians, ancient but unfortunately not antiquated, on the contrary, one that seems to become younger day by day? When asked for a curative intervention, even when the disease is caused by something that is incurable, and when the patient's financial means are limited or minimal, physicians leave no stone unturned and try everything, and they do not stop until
all resources in the medical field, and all the patient's financial means have been exhausted. Hence the complaints amongst the people that physicians squander the wealth of the poor. Thus, in similar cases, the wise physician who has a heart in his breast will dispense more words of God than medicine, and will spend money rather than ask for it, and he will give the money he has received in payment from wealthy patients to the poor, and he will lend it, so, whenever their prayers make him feel he has to do something, he can alleviate the illness rather than cure it, following Hippocrates' advice when he wrote: "it is necessary to know the incurable diseases as well, so they cause as little harm as possible".

Another lesson and one that is no less salutary for the practical physician comes from the answer Christ gives to the centurion who is begging him on his servant's behalf. He was begging him at the top of his voice: "My servant is lying at home paralysed, in terrible distress". Christ replied: "I will come and heal him". He, who was later to show he could command the wind and seas, could certainly have commanded the servant be healed and dismissed the centurion but, nevertheless, he said that he wanted to heal the man with his presence. "I will come and heal him". From this physicians can learn that they are putting others at risk when they prescribe their patients complex cures from afar. It is impossible that the prescriptions a physician gives from afar are to be trusted; Galen warns of this in his writing on the epileptic boy. In a letter to Lucilius, Seneca expresses himself on the same subject with a doctrine that is equal in elegance: "a physician cannot decide in a letter when is the most suitable moment for a bath or food, he has to feel the pulse; only as regards what is to be done in general or what is most opportune can be advised in writing. This indication is not only aimed at those who are absent, but also those to come: nobody will give another kind of advice on when and how to act from afar".

Should I let myself be provoked by this subject, I would risk being long-winded and my discourse would exceed its limits. It would open such a vast field that the result would be a rich harvest rather than just a simple gleaning. Let it therefore suffice, noble scholars, already devoted to the medical practice, that I have given you some incitement in your undertaking of such a salutary, fruitful study. Devote yourselves with your body and soul - "study the Scriptures and peruse the sacred writings night and day".